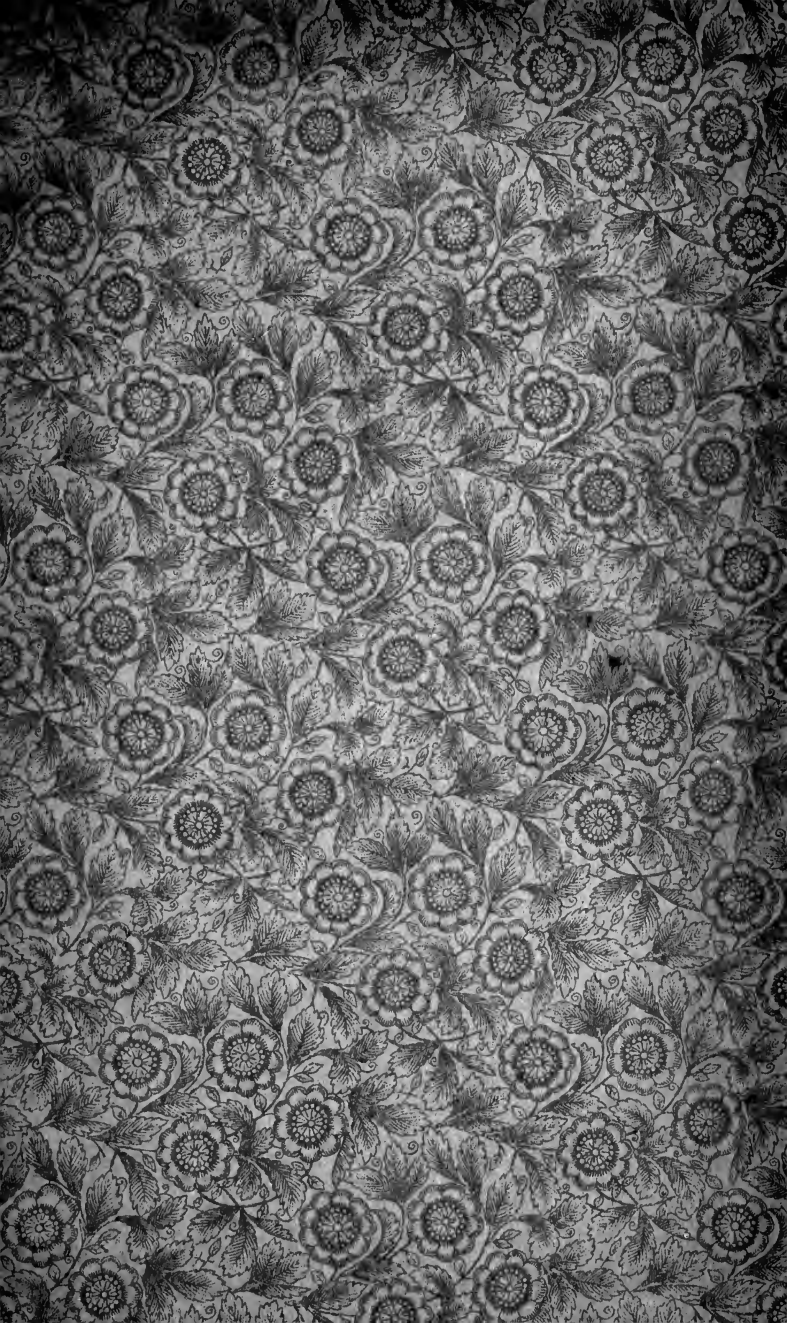


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GUILDEROY

BY

OUIDA



IN THREE VOLUMES

VOL. III.

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GUILDEROY.

CHAPTER XLII.

GLADYS did not send the letter she had written, but neither did she comprehend the greatness of the love which Aubrey called on her to give. It was such love as her father had counselled her to attain and striven to inspire in her; love which rises above all memories of self, and pardons all offences against it as God, in the dreams of mortals, pardons theirs. But her years were too few, her heart was too sore, her jealousy was too intense, her passions had been too early excited, only to be left in solitude and oblivion, for her to be able to reach even in mere comprehension the height to which Aubrey pointed.

The days and the weeks passed on, and winter came earlier to Ladysrood than it came

to the land where Guilderoy still found the earth green and the skies and the seas smiling. Always beautiful in all seasons, yet the great house was austere and melancholy towards the close of the year in the short dark days and in the long silent nights. Its immense woods were leafless, its gardens were cold and swept by bitter winds blowing from the high moors beyond ; on still days or nights, when the sea was stormy, the sound of its breakers roaring on the rocks three miles away was audible and dreary as the very groan of Nature herself.

The young Lady Constance grew indignant and rebellious beyond her power to conceal.

‘If you would only go to Illington or Balfrons!’ she said fifty times a week ; and one day she added insolently, ‘Why should I stay here to please you and my mother? What are either of you afraid of? This place is like a nunnery, like a prison. It is charming enough in summer or autumn when it is full of people, but now it would drive a saint to madness. Have you any lover that they are afraid should come to you? Trust me if you have and I will help you. If you tell me nothing I will elope with one of the grooms.

It will be life at any rate, and it will make my mother sorry she ever sent me here.'

Gladys did not reply, but a few hours after she said to the girl, 'I am going to London to-morrow. I will take you to Illington as I pass through your county.'

The girl embraced her, and was beside herself with joy. But she could not resist a covert impertinence :

'Aubrey is in London!' she said with a rude smile.

'I suppose he is, since there is to be a winter session,' replied her hostess. 'I shall not stay in London. I am going straight to Paris.'

'I wish you would take me with you,' said Lady Constance, repenting that she had not made herself more agreeable, and hastily computing the toilettes, *étrennes*, and pretty things in general which she might have 'got out' of the mistress of Ladysrood if she had concealed her own *ennui* and acquired influence.

'I am very sorry, but I cannot do that for you,' said Gladys. 'I will take you home, where you have so much desired to be. That is all I can do.'

She was in that mood in which a woman will rush on to her own torture or her own destruction, and would not stay though a host of angels and archangels stood in her way to turn her back from her self-chosen path.

She drove rapidly through London from one station to another ; at the latter she was, to her surprise, met on the platform by Aubrey. He had received a telegram from Illington announcing her departure, and Lady Sunbury had had only time to add, ‘Prevent her leaving England at all hazards!’

The express was on the point of departure ; he had no time to say a word ; he entered the carriage with her.

‘I must speak to you,’ he said hurriedly. ‘I can get back to the House by eleven o’clock.’

She did not reply ; she was annoyed and offended. She resented this treatment of her as of some imprudent child whom all his family considered they had a right to control.

Aubrey looked tired and unwell.

Times in England were troubled, and political life stormy and thankless. He did not relax his energies ; but a weary sense grew on him more strongly every year that the

combat was useless, and that, although still veiled under Parliamentary formulæ and constitutional fictions, the country was practically abandoned to mob-rule.

And he looked at the woman whom he admitted to his own thoughts that he loved, and he felt that he was powerless either to touch her heart or to save her from misery.

She was very pale; even her lips were pale, and her blue eyes looked almost black, whilst the dark furs of her travelling hood and of her long cloak enhanced the whiteness of her complexion and the brightness of her hair. She sat opposite to him in silence; she was deeply resentful of his presence there, and she did not aid him by a single sentence.

‘You are going to join Guilderoy?’ he asked abruptly at length.

‘Have I no right to do so?’ she asked coldly.

Aubrey gave a gesture of impatience.

‘When women speak of their rights their joys are gone,’ he thought, and answered aloud: ‘No one could dispute your right, my dear. But it is not always wise to use our right. That I have said to you often before now.’

She was still silent.

‘You had my letter the day I left you at Ladysrood?’ he asked.

‘Yes.’

‘And it made no impression on you?’

‘It was very noble, no doubt. But you are not in my place. You cannot judge.’

‘Can *you* judge clearly, do you think? How much do you see that is true, and how much distorted? How much that is wise, and how much unwise? Feeling is a dangerous guide. It leads us into fatal errors.’

‘I have resisted mine long enough.’

‘And you are tired of resistance. That I can understand. But if you are wise, my dear, and unselfish, you will continue to resist. What good can it do for you to see him in your present state of violent irritation?’

‘I wish to know the truth.’

‘I would rather,’ she added more passionately, ‘know any truth—the worst truth—than live like a child, like an animal, like a plant, told nothing, hearing nothing, unconsidered and disregarded, as month after month goes on. If I am not dear to him, I am a burden to him: there can be no medium

between the two. Let him say so to me honestly, and I will trouble him no more.'

'What would you do?'

'I can live very well on what my father left me.'

'You mean that you will separate yourself from Guilderoy?'

'Will you tell me why I should not?'

'There are a thousand reasons. Chief of all there is the supreme reason that you belong to him, and that you care immensely for him, though you now only listen to your anger.'

Her face flushed.

'It is an insult to say that to me.'

'My dear child, I do not insult any one. It is not my habit. It is the highest honour to her that a woman should remain faithful *quand même*. You seem to me to be ashamed of what is really the finest quality in your character. Youth has often that sort of *mauvaise honte* before its best emotions.'

'You admire Griseldis as my father did!'

'I do not ask you to be Griseldis. You are not beaten, outraged, or robbed of your children; that which you have to complain of you would probably have been spared if you

had endeavoured to be more indulgent and to pass over what would never have been thrust on you if you had not looked for it.'

The train rushed on through the heavy grey darkness; the lamp swung above their heads, and its yellow light shone on her face on which a great anger gathered.

'I know you only care for his reputation because he is a branch of your own great house,' she said coldly. 'It is no doubt natural you should feel so. It is perhaps as natural that I should feel otherwise.'

'That is untrue and unjust,' said Aubrey, with the only sternness she had ever heard from him. 'I have been always your friend, often at great cost to myself, and I have more than once run all risks of rupture with my cousin for your sake in the endeavour to persuade him to give you greater happiness, and greater consideration. I say nothing more to you than your own father said, who of course cared alone for you and nothing for my cousin. I endeavour to dissuade you from your journey now, because I know that to follow Guilderoy will only appear to him espionage, surveillance, interference, curiosity, everything which is

most irritating to the pride and to the liberty of man. He left you in irritation: when his irritation is passed he will return to you, if you do not of your own accord raise some insurmountable obstacle.'

She did not reply; her eyes gazed sombrely through the glass at the darkness of the night and the reflections of the lamp.

'I entreat you,' he continued, 'not to leave England. In England you are with all of us; you are safe in reputation and in circumstance. Ladysrood is too lonely for so young a woman as you are, but my sister will be beyond expression glad if you will stay with her indefinitely, wherever she be. She said so to me only this morning.'

'She is very good, but I shall not trouble her.'

'This is the sheer madness of obstinacy. What will you accomplish by following my cousin? He will not pardon it if you follow and arraign him. What good can it possibly do? What use is the mere momentary indulgence of anger when it must inevitably be followed by a lifetime of regret. The greatest evil of all such upbraidings as you will make to

him, if you see him in your present state of irritated pain, is that in them every one says so much more than they wish or mean, wild and bitter words are exchanged which can never be forgotten, even if they are ever pardoned ; and that which might have been a mere passing sorrow, a temporary estrangement, is deepened and widened into a life-long enmity. I have said to you, before, all that it is possible to say. I only entreat you now to be guided by it, and remain in England.'

Her heart was hardened against her best friend. Like almost every woman she was only capable of believing that those alone loved her who wholly agreed with her and, without reserve, sympathised in all her emotions. She had even doubted her father's affection for her, because it had been critical and temperate in judgment. Her heart now was sore, hurt, apprehensive, full of anger and yet unbearable indignation ; she would have liked her companion to give her limitless, unquestioning consolation and indignation likewise. She longed to weep her heart out on the breast of a friend ; to cry out against fate, and love, and earth, and heaven, and all the cruel treacheries of human

life, and hear some voice full of compassion echo all her own cries. But Aubrey seemed to her only to rebuke her ; only to palliate all she suffered from, only to study the interests of his family, and the conventionalities of the world.

It closed her heart to him. She was too full of pain and anger both to penetrate his motives or even for an instant to dream of his self-denials.

He was powerless to persuade or to control her. All the influence which he had possessed upon her before was lost in the flood of blind and passionate impulses let loose in her by the pain of jealousy. She knew well enough that he was right ; but she would not open her ears to his counsels or her heart to his kindness.

If he had been less loyal to his cousin, he might have been more successful in his persuasions. If he had conjured her by his own affection he might have prevailed on her to return. But no syllable which could have been even influenced by personal desires escaped him. John Vernon risen from his grave could not have spoken with more absolute self-denial than he did. And he gained no influence, he made no impression ; jealousy and indignation, and

the bitter sense of ignorance and wrong, were all hardening her heart and driving her on in strong self-will, regardless of the issue of the fate which she provoked.

Every argument which he could use, every inducement, conjuration, and even prayer which he could call to his aid he exhausted in vain. She knew that her husband and the woman whom he had told her he loved more than any other creature upon earth, were somewhere in Italy together. England in its dark and early winter seemed to her only like that ice-prison which holds the bodies of the damned in the verse of Dante.

Wearied, pained and mortified, Aubrey at last desisted from his endeavours and remained silent, as the train flew through the country silences onwards towards Dover.

‘I am not my cousin’s keeper,’ he thought bitterly. ‘And very likely if he knew what I am doing now he would only misconstrue my reasons, and rebuke me for meddlesome interference!’

There was no sound but that of the oscillations of the train swinging at headlong speed over its iron sleepers.

Neither spoke again till the journey was almost done.

‘You will not warn him that I am going away?’ she said suddenly once.

‘I am not an informer, as I told you once before,’ he answered coldly. ‘But his sister will no doubt find some way to let him know that you have left England.’

‘It does not matter,’ she replied as coldly ; and, she thought, wretchedly, ‘he never changes or pauses in his wishes for me!’

The silence remained unbroken until the slackening of the speed of the train told them that they were near the docks of Dover. Then Aubrey stooped a little forward, and, resting his grey eyes upon her sadly, said with great gentleness, yet with a coldness which she had never heard from him :

‘If you have any true confidence in my judgment and in my affection for you, listen to me now. Return here and wait until Guilderoy comes to you of his own accord. If you have patience that time will not be long.’

She heard the wise words with the impatience of a woman who knows beforehand what advice she is about to receive, and has be-

forehand decided to follow none of it. Aubrey seemed to her cold, unsympathetic, conventional; she wanted his grief and indignation as her support, she was almost unjust enough to say herself that the clannish feeling of family dignity made him think more of preserving his cousin's name from public comment, than of her own personal pain. She was in that state when every form of consolation or counsel seems an irritant or a mockery; when, as Horace has it, anger being unbridled becomes the violent tyrant of the soul.

‘I have a right to know. I have a right to know,’ she repeated to herself. They all seemed to deny her that right; they all seemed to think that she should submit to stay in tutelage and acquiescence, asking nothing and arranging nothing until her husband should at his good will and pleasure deign to recall once more the fact that she existed.

Their names were great, no doubt, and their lives were before the world; but if he chose to sully them and give them to idle calumny, it was no fault of hers.

There was a brief and tempestuous winter session then on, from which it was impossible

for Aubrey to absent himself even a day. Even if he could have done so, it might have been the cause of more harm than good, he thought, if he forced his presence upon her in the journey on which her heart was set. Even his cousin himself, uncertain of temper and capricious in his judgments, might look on such interference with wrong interpretation of it. He saw nothing that he could do for the time being except to leave her to her own choice of action. Things might, perchance, become better than he feared they would do.

He knew that it is of little use to try to be the providence for other lives. The unforeseen is sure to intervene, and accident at every moment overturns the schemes and the wishes of man with a fractiousness which no one can prevent.

‘You must take your own way, my dear,’ he said, with a sigh, ‘I hope you will never regret it.’

Then he accompanied her on to the vessel and bade her farewell.

The night was cold but clear, a sparkling frosty sky and a scarcely ruffled sea. He held her hand a moment in his as he parted from her on the deck.

‘I am sorry I cannot come with you to Paris,’ he said, with a great coldness despite himself still in his tone. ‘But I must be in the House to-night by eleven at latest. God bless you, dear ; since you will go, be prudent and be unselfish. Women suffer much at times no doubt from the selfishness of men, but sometimes I think they repent their own more bitterly when they give way to it. And how often mere selfishness is called love !’

Then he let her hands go, and left her standing on the deck of the steamship under the clear cold skies.

His heart was heavy as a special train carried him backward in his solitude to Westminster as fast as steam could bear him through the night.

‘You filled my barren life with treasure ;
You may withdraw the gifts you gave,’

he thought in the words of the unknown writer to which he had taken a causeless fancy. ‘Nay, she has given me no treasure at all, and she takes away nothing because she gave nothing. The gift was given to a life not barren, but already over full, and I have no part or share in either her pleasures or her joys. Why

should I have? She has used me like a good big dog which could swim through some rough currents to save her; but she is now in the deep sea, and if she can be saved it cannot be by me.'

And that tempter which dwells in the heart of man, and which he had once said at Ladysrood made it almost possible to believe in the old-world myths of devilish agencies, whispered to him now that if he had been less loyal, if he had done as other men would have done, if he had used his many opportunities and his power of influence over her turn to her heart away from his cousin, and win it in its revulsion and reaction to himself, he would have done no more than what nearly every man would have done in his place, and in the issue she might have been consoled, and he at the least been happy.

CHAPTER XLIII.

THE steamer meantime passed on its little voyage through the still frosty air, and over the liquid darkness of the sea. Gladys, enwrapped in her black sables, stayed on deck insensible to cold. She was only conscious of the febrile excitement within her, and of that momentary solace which is always found in any physical movement which relieves or distracts great anxiety.

She went straight to Paris, and descended at an hotel instead of at the house which Guilderoy rented in the Avenue du Bois de Boulogne, and which was then shut up and left in charge of the Suisse. She did not wish her movements to be known to any one. She inquired at the English Embassy where Lord Guilderoy was. With some surprise and, she thought, some embarrassment, his friends there told her that they believed he was in Venice

still; they had heard no change of address from him. She left them to think or conclude what they chose, and went to Venice as Aubrey had done before her. At his palace, where they received her with obsequious deference, she heard that he had left there three weeks before, but where he was they could not say; he had left no address. She perceived that it was an excuse, a falsehood, but they were at least loyal to the instructions they had received; she did not try to bribe them into disobedience, which could easily have been done. She paused for a few days at the house, which was always kept in perfect readiness for his arrival. She thought it probable that he might return.

It was cold in Venice, but it did not seem so to her after the north winds which had been sweeping over the woods and moors of Ladysrood when she had left it. The sun was radiant; the green canals still basked in light, the silvery lagoons bore the little islands on their breasts, the Istrian brigs were unloading their loads of wood in the Giudecca, the Greek traders were landing their varied cargoes at the custom-house, the many-coloured fleet of the

little fishing vessels anchored off the Schiavone and the Botanic gardens ; the scene was always charming, various, gay, a panorama of moving, noiseless, delicately-tinted life.

She acknowledged its charm ; but it made her heart almost heavier than it had been under the wintry shadows and dusky mists of Ladysrood. As she let the gondoliers take her over the water and thread their way with unerring accuracy through the crowded craft of the Canale d'Orfano, she lived over again every moment of the first weeks she had passed in Venice. All that passion spent on them seemed to her like a dream ; some remembered poem that could have nothing in common with her own life. The woman can never habituate herself to the early and abrupt cessation of all love's instincts and caresses, which to the man seems so natural and so inevitable. To her that fairy story should be told with the same ardour every recurrent year ; to him it is as dead as last year's leaves.

At times, as she drifted through the silvery wintry air, she blamed herself, recalling every word of counsel which her father and Aubrey had addressed to her.

She had been unwise, she knew, to speak as she had last spoken to her husband. She had been unwise to reject his proposal to travel with her into distant lands; she had done wrong to repulse so coldly that share in her sorrow which he had offered her with sincere and delicate sympathy. All this she knew, but the vision of his other passions had stood between him and herself, and there was now for ever sounding in her ear the avowal of his love for Beatrice Sorìa.

That one bitter and restless remembrance haunted her, and would not let her stay in peace amongst the gliding waters and soothing stillness of Venice. She did not know where he might be. She could not write to inquire of mere strangers. She had the whole of the Italian journals which were sold at the news-stalls bought and brought to her. He was so well known in Italy that she thought his movements would be observed and chronicled, however much he might try to guard against it.

For several days she saw nothing; on the ninth day she read in one of the sheets a little line announcing that he was still in Naples. She knew from the Venetians that he had left

them some twenty days before. It seemed to her clear as the golden moon rising above the Euganean mountains that he was with her rival.

The voice of her father seemed to say to her from his grave, 'Do not go thither; do not try to compel fate.'

She had done all that she could do to keep off the inquisitiveness of society; she had done more than many would have done to offer a serene and harmonious surface-existence to the stare of curiosity and malignity. But, beneath all that, the aching heart of her youth was angered and seething like a sea in storm; under all her apparent and enforced composure the blindest and maddest of all the passions, jealousy, was tearing her soul asunder.

'I have a right at least to know,' she told herself a thousand times, lying awake in what had been her nuptial chambers; listening to the lapping of the water on the marble stairs below all the long nights through, until the sound of the cannon fired at sunrise on the Giudecca told her that another dreary, empty, anxious, desolate day had come.

'I have a right to know,' she thought, and,

allowing Aubrey's letter to be unanswered, she left the Venetian sea-mists and water-ways, and went, also, southward through the amber sun-rays and the roseate lights of a luminous winter's day spreading with noontide golden and glorious over the lagoons and the meadows beyond Mestre.

CHAPTER XLIV.

It was now the close of November. Beatrice Sorìa was at the great palace of the Sorìa, fronting the sea, where she still ruled supreme by virtue of her young children over whose lives she was left sole and complete guardian. This palace was one of the marvels of the south, built by Angelo Fiori, with ceilings by Domenichino, and frescoes by Simone Papa; its façade dominated the sea; to its rear stretched large and beautiful gardens. It was here that Guilderoy had first succumbed to her charm in one soft, gay, Neapolitan winter, which ever remained on the memories of both of them as the one perfect page in their book of life.

It was years ago now; but every detail and hour of it seemed to come back to him as on a magic glass, as he saw the long white majesty of the great house tower above its stairs and terraces, and mole of marble. Every deli-

cious and enchanted moment passed there revived in his remembrance ; all that their intimacy had had of storm, of dispute, of doubt, of jealousy, of too arrogant dominion, had all faded from his mind as though they had never been. His memories retained only the glow and glory of its noontide light. He utterly forgot the thunder clouds which had often broken over the golden beauty of those days of love.

When at length he roused himself from these memories as he stood on the strip of shore below and gazed at the mass of sculpture towering above him, he mounted the great stairway from the sea and asked of the porter at its gates if the Duchess Sorìa would receive him : he was met by an inflexible denial. Her excellency received no one except from four to six o'clock every Saturday afternoon, and again on Monday evenings from ten. It was then Tuesday.

‘ With the crowd !—never,’ he said to himself ; and turned away, with feverish impatience and an aching heart.

He passed the day wandering beside the sea or in the streets.

At night he wrote to her : the first letter

he had addressed to her since that in which he had announced his marriage. His declarations were as ardent and as comprehensive in it as those of Tibullus to Cerinthus in the thirteenth *Carmen* of the fourth book. He received no answer ; and he was as wretched as Cerinthus's lover.

On the third day after he had sent it, his heart beat breathlessly at sight of a large envelope, with the two gold crowns on it, directed in the handwriting which he had once known so well, and which had sent him letters which at one time he had worn in his breast and which at another time he had held to a lighted match and burnt.

He opened the envelope with intense anxiety and suspense. But it contained only a card printed in gold which announced that the Duchess Sorìa might be visited in 'prima sera' on Monday evenings. There was no written word with it ; only his name filling up the blank space left for that purpose on the card.

'Can any woman forget so utterly?' he thought in passion and pain, oblivious that if she had learned the lesson of forgetting, he had been the first to teach it to her.

His pride told him to leave Naples at once without seeing her; he felt that there was neither dignity nor courage in remaining a suppliant at the gates of one who once had been wholly his.

The remonstrances of Aubrey haunted him with persistent reproach, and for the first time in his life he saw his own conduct in its true light. But the ascendancy which Beatrice Sorìa possessed over him was stronger even than the impulses of pride. He could not bring himself to leave the scene of their former joys, the place where soonest, if ever, her heart would return to him on the impulse of memory.

Moreover, others who admired or adored her, others freer than he to prove their homage, had followed her thither also; and an intense jealousy of all that was possible in her future held him. There, as of old, in those smiling seas, the sirens had held too reckless mortals in their power, and so hers held him now upon these shores. He remained, as though he were a boy of twenty, spending his hours beneath the sea-walls of her palace, and trusting to some favouring hazard to afford him

that unwitnessed interview with her which he sought. He did not accept her permission to approach her with the crowd at her receptions. He felt that he could not trust himself to see her first again before a throng, of which many would be strangers and all would be odious to him. Every day at sunset she drove, like other great ladies of the city; and every day at sunset he was standing or riding near when her great bronze gates unclosed. She gave him a salutation and a smile, but never checked her horses. He saw, or imagined that he saw, in the smile a triumphant mockery of himself. He was mistaken: it was merely the slight smile of courtesy which any well-bred woman gives to an acquaintance.

There was no movement of society at that time in the city. The great world of Naples never bestirs itself until carnival comes. The populace were wild and mirthful in the streets as usual, but none of the great houses were opened except hers. She had all the customs of a wider world than that of the Neapolitans, and had never been bound by their observances.

The empty and fruitless days succeeded one another, and brought him nothing that he

wished. At last he remembered that golden key which the classic lovers of this soil recommend to those who would see unclosed a door too cruelly shut against them. All things are saleable still in the land of Ovid and Tibullus, and the honesty of no guardian of the *lares* is more proof now than then against a bribe. He saw, and looked at enviously, in the high wall of the garden, the iron grating of the postern gate, by which he had used to have the right of entrance at his pleasure. The same creeping plants hung over it as in other years; the same blackbirds plucked at the black berries of its flowering ivy; the same great magnolia trees shrouded it in deepest shade; the same sound of falling water came from the fountains behind it, and the same cripple lay on the road in front of it, stretching out his brown and filthy hand for alms. Nothing was changed except himself, nothing gone except his privileges. He even heard the very voice of the same dog as, roused by the sounds of his footsteps, it ran barking along under the wall within.

In time, and with some difficulty—for the dependents of the Sorìa palace valued their

place and feared to lose it—the potent talisman of gain succeeded in drawing back the rusted bolts of the little iron door, and the underling, who had betrayed his mistress for a handful of paper money, held back the dog as Guilderoy passed into the evergreen shades of the familiar garden paths. But the dog, escaping from the gardener's hold, ran to him and leaped joyfully on him.

‘Poor Pyrrho, do you remember me? You are more merciful than your mistress!’ he murmured, as he caressed the dog, profoundly touched by its affectionate welcome. He walked on under the deep aisles of bay and laurel.

It was dark here in the gardens, though only the first stars had risen over the sea. He had chosen the hour at which she would be sure to have returned from her drive; her dinner-hour was not until nine, he knew, and when she came in it was her habit to sit alone awhile in a small room hung entirely with allegorical paintings by Albani, and having great windows looking towards the sea; it served her as a boudoir and a library in one. Here, again and again, hundreds of times he

had found her of old reading some new German or French book of philosophy, or the verses of some Latin poet.

He entered the house by the garden loggia and the apartments which were called the garden-rooms. The servants were then closing the shutters for the night; but they knew him and were not surprised to see him there, and one of them ushered him without question through the house to the little chamber which was called the *Salotto dell' Albani*.

She was seated with her back to the door, reading, or seeming to read. The light from the lamp fell on the dark gold of her hair, which was the hair of *Palma Vecchio's Barbara*. He could only see the crown of her head, and one fold of her velvet gown, the hue of the dark side of an olive-leaf; all else was hidden by the carved back of her large chair.

He saw her thus through the parting of the velvet curtains hanging before the door. Two lamps were burning low, and shed a roseate light on the room; the windows, still unshuttered, showed the serene night, in which a flush of day still lingered.

He motioned the servant backward, and

the man, who had known him well in other days and had then always let him enter unannounced, allowed him to do so now, and closed the door noiselessly.

In a moment, before the Duchess Sorìa had even looked up from the volume she was reading, Guilderoy had crossed the room and was at her feet.

She withdrew her gown from the eager clasp of his hands, and a flush of anger rose over her face.

‘You have bribed my servants!’ she said with unutterable scorn.

‘You left me no other way. You would not answer me. You would not see me alone.’

‘Why should I see you alone? As for answer I already answered enough—more than enough—at Aix.’

‘It is an answer which I will not take!’

‘You must take it, since it is my will to give it.’

She withdrew her hands from his hold with something of the violence which he had once known in her.

He kissed the folds of her skirts.

‘I will not take it; I do not believe in it.’

All can never be over between *us*. Here, in this sacred room, which heard my earliest vows to you, I swear that you are the only woman whom I have ever loved in my whole life.'

'To how many women have you said so? And how dare you recall vows which were only uttered to be forsworn?'

'I have said so to no other woman. No other—living or dead.'

'You have said so at least to your wife?'

'Never. I never loved her.'

'Then why did you marry her? No woman can have either compassion or respect for any man who knows what he wishes so little as that.'

He coloured with offended pride and irritated pain.

'I am human,' he said angrily. 'Men have never, that I know of, in any part of the world's history, been conspicuous for consistency where their passions were involved.'

'Do you not understand what an insult to all passion such inconsistency is?'

'No; passion is, in its very essence, wayward and shifting as the winds. You reproach me with my mutability. But you only do so

because you will not endeavour to understand. It is only comprehension that is ever pitiful.'

She looked at him with a long gaze, under which his own eyes fell.

'I think I understand you perfectly,' she said in her low, sweet, dreamy voice. 'You study your own pleasure. You do not consider anything beyond it. I loved you immensely. It is no flattery to you to say so since, for nearly seven years, I never disguised it from you, and the grave of your child is there in attestation of it. You knew that you were my world; yet the moment that a new caprice attracted you, you dismissed me with scarcely more consideration than you would have shown to a *femme entretenue*. I said nothing; I could not avenge it, and women of my character do not complain or appeal. Now, because you see me sought by other men, or because perhaps your feeling for me was of a deeper kind than you knew, you are as ready to throw aside your allegiance to others as you were ready then to throw aside yours to me for them. Why should I give you either pity or credence? Why should I believe in the strength of feelings which have never been

more stable than a marsh-light which flits hither and thither? You do not know what love is. You have too much self-love to know it.'

He sighed as he heard her ; his conscience told him that there was truth in the charge. Yet he knew that his love for her was very great ; what proof could he give her which would persuade her of its strength?

'You are unmerciful like all women,' he said at last. 'May I, without offence, tell you a truth also? I did love you greatly—as much as it is in me to love at all. But you tried me often. You were too exacting, too imperious, too passionate. We always revolt when we feel the curb. It was a momentary impatience ; not of you, but of the dominion you sought to have over me, which made me fancy that in marriage I might perhaps find greater tranquillity and more genuine peace.'

'Besides which, Lady Guilderoy was very lovely, and you wished for her, and you had never denied yourself any whim or any desire ! It is very possible that I was unwise and exacting. Few women are otherwise ; and I have one pretension I confess, one which you knew of old : I reign alone, or I reign not at all.'

Guilderoy smiled wearily.

‘Is that worthy of your knowledge of our weaknesses?’

‘Perhaps not. I make no claim to consistency. But what I claim I give. The world considers me a coquette because I have power over men. But I have never been a coquette in the sense of dividing my affections. I will admit, even though it flatters you, that I have always been true to you though you were false to me.’

He bowed his head and kissed her hands. His eyes were dim with tears.

‘Did you doubt it?’ she said with a little disdain. ‘How little our lovers know of us! Our hearts beat against theirs, and our lives mingle with theirs, and yet they go from us knowing no more of our real natures than if they had embraced things of wood or of wax! Is it stupidity, or indifference? I suppose it is the immense blindness of self-love. And you are all of you so blunt in your perceptions and so coarse,’ she pursued. ‘If a woman has hazarded her position for you, though you know she is all yours, and is as faithful as Dido, as tender as Hero, yet in your rude and

clumsy classifications you will, in your own thoughts, bracket her with Lydia and Laïs !’

She put his hands off hers almost roughly for a woman of such slow and languid grace of movement.

‘Not I,’ he murmured, gazing at her with eyes in which she might read more than the worship of old.

‘Oh yes ! you—you more, perhaps, than most men. When you wrote me your letter of farewell you ended it in delicate phrases because you are a gentleman, but the truth which pierced through them was that you left me as you would have left any bought companion of your pleasures.’

‘No ; ten thousand times no !’ he said vehemently. ‘You imagined what was not there. You exaggerated the offence to you. Women always will. I might be ungrateful, unworthy, failing in appreciation and penetration as you say, but I never for a moment failed to render you the honour that you merit.’

She smiled faintly.

‘Since you left me how can you expect me to believe it ? If you leave your wife to-morrow will she believe that you honour her ?’

‘Why will you speak of her?’

‘We must speak of her. She exists.’

‘Let me forget that she does so!’

The same faint dreamy smile came on her mouth; he could not tell whether she believed or disbelieved him; whether she esteemed him true or false, whether she loved him still or had put him wholly from her inner life.

‘You must be aware that your offence to me is one which no woman who has any pride can pardon. You love me, you do not love me, you think you love me again, you vacillate, you doubt, you forsake, you adore, and you expect me to humbly await you while your heart oscillates to and fro, now close to mine, now leagues away from mine.’

‘I expect nothing,’ he said bitterly. ‘I have lost the right to expect, if I were ever happy enough to possess it. Only if you will tell me any test by which I can prove you my sincerity tell me what it is, and then you will learn whether I now speak on mere caprice or not.’

She was silent, while all the light of her deep and lustrous eyes seemed to plunge into his and through them search his inmost soul.

She was silent some moments, and she could hear the loud fast beating of his heart.

‘There is only one test possible for me to accept or to believe in,’ she said at last.

‘Tell me what it is ; or, indeed, I will consent to it untold.’

‘Do not be too rash,’ she said, with a cold and momentary smile. ‘You must, however, know very well what it is. Leave your wife for ever and I shall believe in your love for me.’

He turned away pale and he was mute.

‘You hesitate?’ she said with interrogation and disdain.

He sighed heavily.

‘It is a demand which does not affect myself alone.’

‘Did your demand of the past affect yourself alone? What demand of love, or of life, can ever concern oneself alone?’

‘You mean to leave her publicly?’

‘Yes ; nothing less than that. I will accept no divided allegiance. It was for her that you insulted me. It must now be her whom you surrender for me.’

He was silent.

‘My honour,’ he said at last, but he hesitated, and she filled up the sentence.

‘Your honour! You mean your conventional deference to the world’s opinion. You are weary of your wife, you shun, dislike, and avoid her, but you consider your honour saved, if you affect with her, for society, a union which has wholly ceased to exist either in fact or feeling. I tell you you know nothing of genuine passion or vital pain. You are honest neither to myself or her.’

He was silent; he breathed heavily; his heart was torn between conflicting emotions.

‘Remember,’ said Beatrice Sorìa coldly, ‘I do not ask this of you; I do not even wish it; much less do I counsel it. I only say, as I have a right to say, that such alone is the proof of your sincerity which I can accept or credit. You already seek from me patience, forgiveness, and oblivion of no common sort. I have a right to answer that I can only give you these on certain conditions. You can fulfil them or reject them as you please. There was a time, I confess, when I could have died of the pain of your abandonment. But that time is past. You have taught me to live without you. I

can do so now and in the future. It is a lesson which no man who is wise teaches to any woman.'

He sighed as he heard: the words were the same in meaning as those which Aubrey had spoken to him of his wife.

'What are your conditions?' he asked in a low voice. 'Tell me more clearly. What is it you exact? Your right I admit; I have never denied it.'

'What I have said. That you should leave your wife, and make it known to her that you leave her for ever. You will write a letter of farewell to her which I shall read and send. It is for her that you insulted and forsook me. It is her now whom you must sacrifice—if you are now in earnest.'

He was silent a moment; then he walked to the table near on which were paper and pens and ink, and a litter of opened letters. 'Tell me what to write,' he said with the same sound in his voice, which was half sullen and half implored. He plunged one of the quills in the ink, and turned to her and waited.

'No. Not in that haste,' she said; and she rose and closed her writing-table. 'You shall

not say or think in the future that I hurried you into an agitated and unmeditated act. Years ago we were mad like that, but such madness is over. Your choice must be deliberate and wholly voluntary. It will last out your life and mine. Go now. If you choose you can return to this room at this hour to-morrow. If not, leave Naples, and do not attempt ever again to see me or to speak to me, either alone or in the world.'

Before he could reply or remonstrate she had touched a handbell which stood near her ; one of the men of the antechamber answered.

'Show my lord to his carriage,' she said to the servant.

Guilderoy could not resist such dismissal. He kissed her hand with the slight salutation of an acquaintance and left her presence. The servant ushered him with ceremony through the house and out by the great gates of the sea front. He was scarcely conscious of what he did or where he went ; and he found himself standing on the beach beneath the marble wall, with the placid sea before him shining under the stars, a few boats rocking in the silver of its surf.

CHAPTER XLV.

UNNERVED, beset with a thousand conflicting emotions, divided between intense desire, and that honour which his education and his instincts made a second nature to him, Guilderoy left the hall and went home across the gardens to the palace which he had occupied half a mile away. The night was very brilliant ; the stars seemed strewn thickly as diamond dust ; all the ear-piercing and countless noises of the Neapolitan streets had ceased. There was no sound but that of the murmur of the sea. He walked through the white intense moonlight and the dim shadows, now passing some recumbent figure lying stretched in sleep upon the stones, some basket of violets whose tired seller had fallen asleep beside them on a marble stair, some Madonna's lamp burning within a sculptured shrine. He looked at nothing, neither outward to the sea

nor upward to the stars, nor downward at the slumbering beggars. His eyes only saw, as it were, painted on the radiant night, the face of Beatrice Sorìa.

What she had demanded of him was a greater price than if she had asked of him the sacrifice of existence itself.

He was a man to whom the curiosity and comment of the world were intolerable ; to whom the honour of his name had been always sacred and kept intact through all his follies and excesses ; his attachment to John Vernon lying dead in his grave at Christslea was sincere, and his sense of the duty owing to his memory was strong.

The hours passed uncounted ; he had no sense either of hunger or thirst ; he was wholly possessed by the agitation of his senses and his emotions, and the struggle which was violent between his desires and his consciousness of what honour asked of him.

The memory of Gladys as he had seen her first on the moors in the pale autumn morning came over him with a pang of wistful repentance and regret. The recollection of her in the first days of her marriage to him smote him with the

sense of having sacrificed some innocent and trustful animal on the altars of his own brief and destroying desires.

He knew that to both the woman whom he had married and the woman whom he had loved he had behaved with the unkindness which is the inseparable offspring of a purely selfish and physical passion. He saw himself for the moment as others saw him ; and he condemned himself as they condemned him in these solitary and bitter hours of self-examination.

What Aubrey had justly defined in him as a feeling not of affection but of egotism towards his wife, made it terrible to him to appear to other men as wanting in respect or in regard for her. He was sensitive to the insolence of public comment; and he abhorred the thought that through him the world would talk of her. He remembered her father with contrition and self-condemnation; he remembered his own violent self-will in insisting on the caprice of his momentary desires, and all the wisdom with which John Vernon had endeavoured to dissuade him from his folly. He could not possibly blame any one except himself. He could lay at no

one else's door the difficulty and temptation in which he was now placed. He had blamed her indeed for want of sympathy and affection, but he knew that he had had little right to do so.

He passed the night hours pacing to and fro beside the sea. Once he bade a boatman row him out on to the moonlit water, and he watched from it the receding shores.

The boat drifted on under the stars on the open sea; the rower, half asleep, steering mechanically with his foot, and ever and anon idly dipping his oars into the waves. Guilderoy was stretched at full length, his head resting on the bench, his eyes watching afar off the stately pile of the Soria Palace towering against the moon-bathed clouds, whilst the fragrance of its orange gardens came to him over the waves. After all, it seemed to him, his first duty was to the one who dwelt there.

His marriage had been a supreme wrong done to her. If she could find reparation or consolation in his love now, he thought that he was bound in honour to afford them to her; at least his wishes led him to try and believe so. And he loved her more than he had ever loved

any woman ; her touch, her voice, her regard, stirred the very depths of his soul as no other's had ever done. Years of separation had given to his desires the freshness of a new passion, and the keen jealousy with which he had watched the homage of others had intensified it tenfold. He was in that mood in which a man feels that all other things may perish if his love be left to him ; the cry of Faust, 'I give my soul for ever so that this woman may be mine!'

It seemed to him that he never really lived save when he was with her. His senses were stimulated, his intelligence was aroused, his wandering fancies were captured and concentrated by her as they were by no other woman. The very indignity which he had inflicted on her, and which she had pardoned, endeared her to him ; she had not clung to him in slavish humility, but she had loved him and forgiven him with a greatness which ennobled her in his sight. Such madness might be past with her ; in him it was as living still as when, years before, he had first watched the stars rise over these waves and the moon shine on the pale sculptures of her palace. She believed that he was

incapable of suffering ; but he felt that he drank its fullest cup to the lees. She was the only woman on earth to him ; the world seemed to hold no other. But a remorse which was in its way as strong as the desire of his soul was also at work within him. He knew that he would act with surpassing disloyalty if he deserted so young a woman as his wife, and one so wholly blameless.

She had been unable to content him indeed ; she had failed to correspond to some fanciful ideal which he had formed and imagined for a few months to be incorporated in her. She was not what he had wished or what he had cared for ; but that was no fault of hers. She had promised him nothing which she had not fulfilled, and she had borne his name blamelessly through all trials.

In what she had said to him on the day that he had left Ladysrood she had been wholly justified by facts ; and though he had so violently resented her words, his conscience told him that they were wholly deserved ; that they had indeed been more forbearing than many a woman in her position would have made them.

As ludicrous and commonplace thoughts intrude themselves sometimes on the deepest and most tragic emotions, there recurred to his mind his conversation with his sister on the evening when he had announced to her his intended marriage; and of how he had replied to her prophecies of woe with the jest that no one ever abandoned his wife in these latter days, unless it were a workman who went off with the household savings to the United States. It had always seemed to him so easy to live so that the world need know nothing of private disunion or dissension; so easy to conduct existence on the smooth lines of outward courtesy and apparent regard; so easy to shut the door politely in the face of a staring world in such a manner that it should imagine there was perfect felicity behind it. He had always been disdainfully censorious of those who had not the tact or the good taste requisite to preserve these externals of harmonious agreement which are all that the world demands. And now he himself was on the brink of affording to the world that spectacle of disordered passion and of public severance which

had always seemed to him so coarse and so unwise !

Amidst all the heat and confusion of his thoughts there came over him the memory of John Vernon's pale calm features in the mask of death as he had seen them, with the summer sunlight falling soft and warm upon them, while the little birds had sung outside the casement underneath the leaves. The pang of an immense remorse, the throb of a great shame, stirred in his heart. Egotist though he was, given over to pleasure and indifferent to rebuke, he felt ashamed and guilty before the mute reproach of the dead man's memory.

'I gave you all I had,' the voice of the dead seemed to say to him. 'I gave it against my will, and I warned you that you would use it ill. What have you done with it? What will you say to me on that day when you, too, come before the tribunal of the grave?'

He shuddered as he lay under the golden December moon, shining cold as steel down on the steel-blue seas. What had become of his honour? Where was his good faith to the dead? To a living man he might have been untrue, had he chosen; but to be false to one

who could never arraign him, never offend him, never rebuke him!—he seemed to grow a coward and a liar in his own sight. All better things, all higher truths that he had ever believed in, awakened in his soul, and bade him suffer what he would, lose all he might, but be faithful to his word to one who was no more numbered with the living. He gazed at the faint white shore gleaming afar off under the moonlit skies.

‘My love, my love!’ he murmured, ‘I cannot be dishonoured even for you! He trusted me——’

The tears filled his eyes, and the shining seas and the starry skies grew dim to his sight.

‘Put me ashore,’ he said to the boatman. His resolve was taken.

CHAPTER XLVI.

WHEN he at last reached his own residence and crossed the court to enter his own apartments, it was nearly but not quite dawn. Large lamps swinging from the ceiling dimly lighted the two ante-chambers. In the second of them his body-servant was lying, fully dressed, face downwards, on one of the couches, tired out with his long vigil. Guilderoy, sunk in the gloom of his own thoughts, did not even see the man, and passed on to the three large rooms which divided the vestibule from his bed-chamber.

It was an old palace; lofty, spacious, magnificent, faded and dull. Busts of dusky yellow marble, weird bronzes stretching out gaunt arms into the darkness, ivories brown with age, worn brocades with gold threads gleaming in them, and tapestries with strange and pallid figures of dead gods, were all

half revealed and half obscured in the twilight. As he moved through them, a figure which looked almost as pale as the Adonis of the tapestry and was erect and motionless like the statue of the Wounded Love, came before his sight out of the shadows. It was that of Gladys.

He paused, doubting his senses. With her long black robes and her pale features she looked rather a creature of the grave than of the earth, in the faint and fluctuating light which fell on her from the swinging lamps above.

For some moments neither of them spoke.

‘What has happened?’ he said at last, instinctively. ‘Why are you here?’

He expected to hear of some calamity, of Ladysrood burnt down, or of his kindred dead. She was silent. She was deadly pale; there seemed nothing alive in her except her intensely searching eyes, which gazed at him.

‘For the love of God do not look at me like that!’ he cried involuntarily. ‘What has brought you from England? Why do you wait for me at such an hour?’

‘It is the hour at which you have left the Duchess Sorìa,’ she said, in a voice which was low but harsh.

His worn face flushed.

‘That is absolutely untrue! I left her house at eight this evening.’

She gave an impatient movement which said without words, ‘Why lie to me?’

‘I tell you that I left her house at eight,’ he repeated. ‘You shall not insult her in my hearing.’

‘But you may insult me in hers!’

‘I never insult you. I speak of you always with the most unfeigned respect. But if you begin to track me, to lie in wait for me, to spy on me, to catechise me, I tell you honestly that I shall respect you no more, nor will I patiently endure such espionage.’

All the gentler and more remorseful emotions towards her with which his breast had been filled as he had paced the solitary shores and the deserted streets had been destroyed in an instant by the sight of her in his apartments and by her mention of the one name dearest to him.

‘Who has a right to be near you if not I?’

she asked with a haughty anger which scorched up the tears that mounted to her sight.

‘No one disputes your right,’ he answered with great impatience. ‘But between right and welcome there are many leagues ; and the title to come to me unbidden I would never award to any woman were she ten thousand times over my wife.’

‘I am come to solicit nothing from you,’ she said coldly.

‘Oh no ! Only to watch for me, to trace out my actions, to question me, to fetter me, to haunt me, to offend me !——’

‘Is it so strange that I wished to see **you**, to know something of you ? For three months you have not written to me, only to your servants ; I heard that you were here ; here with her—the only woman whom you have ever loved—so you told me !’

Her words were broken, and her voice had a great emotion in it ; but that which would have touched him in his mistress only angered him the more intensely in his wife.

‘I forbid you to bring her name into this discussion !’ he said with more passion. ‘You choose to follow me, and to make me re-

proaches ; it is the way of women ; they only lose all by it, but they are never deterred. I came away from you because you asked me intolerable questions and wearied me with useless scenes ; if I have not loved you it has not been my fault. Love is not to be whipped into obedience like a straying child.'

'Why marry me?'

'What is the use of saying that again and again? You said it in London ; you said it at Ladysrood. I deceived myself, and so I deceived you—with no thought or desire of deceit. When a man tells a woman candidly that he mistook his love for her, what more is there to say? He should ask her pardon, perhaps, for the wrong he has unintentionally done her. In that sense I ask yours.'

She did not reply.

'It is better you should know,' he continued rapidly. 'You will not care perhaps. If not, so best. I was about to write to you. I am true to an allegiance promised before I promised mine to you. I am aware the world does not recognise such unwitnessed vows, but they are all love cares for ; they are all that ever really hold love, let men say what they will. I must

tell you, since you are here, the entire truth. I can give you no more of my life ; I can live no longer in a feigned harmony which has wholly ceased to exist if ever it did exist. I do not think it ever did between us ; you may hate me, and the world may execrate me ; but so it must be henceforth.'

He paused in strong emotion ; he was neither heartless nor ungenerous, and he knew that his words must of necessity sound both. He hated to give pain to any living creature ; and though she seemed so cold and still that he doubted, as he had always doubted, her feeling greatly, yet he knew that any woman must suffer, so addressed, even if she only suffered in her pride.

He waited for her to reply ; but she said nothing. She stood motionless with perfect tranquillity.

The words were honest and truthful, but to their hearer they seemed cruelty and brutality incarnate. Had not her pride restrained her, she could have cried aloud like some animal in torture. But she was very proud, and whatever agony she might suffer afterwards, she had force to hold back any expression of it now. Moreover, a consuming jealousy was

upon her, giving her temporary strength ; and yet her whole existence seemed racing and whirling from her as a great river courses in its haste and storm towards the bottomless sea. She looked at him where he stood under the falling light from the lamp, pale, agitated, angered, and she could have thrown herself upon his breast and cried to him, ‘ I love you ! I love you ! give me some place—the least, the lowest—but some place in your heart ! ’

But pride kept back that yearning impulse ; she stood, erect and cold, in her black clothes, with the sombre light of an unutterable reproach burning like flame in her dark blue eyes.

‘ You are, again, the lover of the Duchess Sorìa ? ’ she said doggedly.

It was the most fatal thing she could have said, but she was not wise enough to know that. Guilderoy’s face flushed hotly ; he felt all the impotent fury of a man forced to say what it seemed infamous to say no matter how he might reply.

‘ If to adore her be to be her lover, then I am so,’ he said with violence. ‘ In no other sense—now—as *yet*.’

She heard the first declaration ; she gave no credence to the second ; she thought it the mere conventional declaration with which a man deems it necessary in honour to deny his relations with a woman.

‘I came to hear this from your own lips,’ she said with perfect coldness. ‘I have heard it. There can be no longer any doubt. I will go now.’

‘Go where?’ he asked in vague uneasiness.

‘That cannot matter to you. Farewell!’

His anxiety deepened despite his anger and his preoccupation. Her manner seemed to him unnatural. Its serenity was not in keeping with the burning pain and rebuke spoken in her eyes.

‘Why will you make me these scenes?’ he said wearily. ‘I was thinking of you kindly when you lay in wait for me thus. I cannot endure surveillance, interference, espionage, and when you speak of the woman I love more than all others on earth you madden me.’

She smiled bitterly.

‘I will leave you to that other woman. Surely you can ask no more. Believe me, I shall make neither complaint nor scandal. I

remember what my father wished. Your name and his are safe with me.'

'I will write to you,' he said hurriedly, embarrassed and distressed. 'All possible arrangements or consideration shall be made;—all that I have is yours. I am deeply sensible of the injury I have done to you in making you my wife when you were too young to know my character or your own, or measure the feelings of either of us. But if your father sees now, as some say the dead can see the souls of the living, he will know that I was entirely honest in all that I promised then, both to him and to yourself.'

His eyes were dim and his voice was uncertain as he spoke; a great emotion moved him, and it seemed to him that she felt nothing whatever—nothing save some indignant scorn, perhaps at most some outraged pride.

'She does not really care; she knows nothing of love,' he thought. It seemed to him that any woman who had loved him would have either poured out to him all the furies of a disappointed and deserted passion, or have fallen at his feet weeping in agonised supplication.

But she gave no sign either of violence or of wretchedness.

At her father's name her mouth trembled, and he thought for a moment that her composure would desert her; but she soon recovered it. Whatever she felt, she betrayed none of it.

'Be good enough to let me pass,' she said coldly; and mortified, humbled, yet angered with a sense of injustice done to him as though he were the offended, not the offender, he drew back and let her go as she desired.

'Where are you going?' he said with hesitation. 'You cannot go like this, all alone, in a strange city.'

'My servants are waiting. I will return to England. Why do you even ask me? It cannot matter to you!'

'It must matter.'

He was confused, agitated, passionately angered, and yet all the while conscious of a vague fear that in her strange stillness and repose she would do something rash and irrevocable, something which would haunt him all his life long with remorse.

‘Let me pass,’ she said, with her forced serenity unbroken. ‘I have told you I leave you free; what more can I say? You need fear nothing for any tragedy which might embroil you with your world. I shall go home.’

But as she went out before him through the bare dim rooms, her step unfaltering and her head erect, he realised how impossible it was to let her leave him thus unprotected—a woman who was his wife, who was as young as she and as fair to look upon, alone in the streets of such a city as Naples was at such an hour.

‘I must accompany you at least,’ he said as he overtook her. ‘You cannot go out in these streets alone—I will take you wherever you will.’

Then, and then alone, her self-control forsook her; she turned upon him with the rapid and violent action of some animal wounded and tormented beyond its power to bear.

‘When my whole life is destroyed by you, can you insult me by offering me mere formal external courtesies? Can you think that it

would matter to me if any beggar of these lanes stabbed me and dragged my body to the sea? What do you know of love, of grief, of pain, of sacrifice? Nothing—nothing—nothing—no more than those marble gods that stare there in the dusk. Let me go! You shall not stir one step with me. I have told you that my servants wait below. There shall be no tragedy such as you fear should hurt your reputation as a man of honour with the world!’

Then, with the swiftness of that step with which she had once gone careless and light-hearted through the moorland gorse, she went through the shadowy chambers, past the still sleeping servant, under the great brazen lamp burning in the entrance, and down the marble stairway of the silent house.

He did not follow her.

All the gentleness and self-reproach with which he had thought of her in the night just passed died utterly out of him under the sting of her disdainful and cutting words. Though she, like the woman whom he loved, charged him with insincerity and heartlessness, he knew himself that he had neither; he knew that,

whatever he appeared to both of them, he suffered with genuine emotion and with true self-reproach. He had said no word to her which had not cost him more to utter than it cost her to hear. He had ideals and dreams of what could never now be realised, and he had the instinctive honour of a nature both proud and sensitive. Even though he had no feeling for her of affection, she might still have kept him by tenderness; but her words, which had struck him to the quick, had hardened against her all the feelings of his soul. Beatrice Sorìa might rebuke and might condemn him, but she at the least loved him with a passion which forgave all, if it in turn exacted all.

Through the iron gratings of the large unshuttered windows of his rooms the first white light of day came faintly through the duskier lamplight, falling on the pale figures of the tapestried hangings and the yellowed marbles of the Cæsars and the gods.

He threw open the casements and let the sharp, clear, cold air of earliest day pour past him into the shadows of the rooms. When the sun rose he sent three lines to the Sorìa Palace :

‘I found her here. I told her the truth. We are parted for ever. When may I come to you?’

They brought him in answer three words only :

‘When you will.’

CHAPTER XLVII.

A FEW evenings later Lady Sunbury was in her own house of Illington in the midst of a large circle of guests. It was two hours after midnight, her drawing-rooms and ball-room were full; everyone was amused and amusing; she was going from one to another with bland smiles and suitable phrases, her harassed thoughts all the while with her elder daughter, who was encouraging the wrong suitor, and her second son, who was lying dangerously wounded in India.

In the midst of her occupations and pre-occupations, at the moment when the cotillion was at its height, one of her servants called her away and presented to her a letter which had been brought by a messenger from Italy. She recognised in the superscription the handwriting of her brother's wife, and on the seal the coat-of-arms of the Vernons.

‘How exactly like her absurd extravagance!’ she thought with contempt. ‘How exactly like her to send a servant all the way by express with a letter, just as if we were in the days of the Stuarts or Tudors! What does she suppose that the postal service and the electric wires exist for, I wonder?’

Innovations in trifles always annoyed her more than anything else; she was so extremely irritated at this folly of her sister-in-law in sending a man-servant to carry a letter by hand from the continent to England, that in her annoyance at the trivial eccentricity she almost forgot her curiosity and apprehension as to the possible contents of the packet.

She took it, however, to her boudoir, and there, being alone, opened and read it. The letter was written by Gladys from Rome, and began without prefix or preliminary.

‘Do not blame your brother for anything that you may hear of him. The fault is altogether mine. I am not a woman who could possibly make him happy as his wife. I am cold, hard, and unforgiving. My father even told me so more than once before he died. Therefore blame me entirely, and not Lord

Guilderoy, for our ensuing separation. There need be no publicity or scandal of any kind. I am sensible of the many gifts I have received from him, and I shall not return them with ingratitude. But neither will I see him, nor speak with him, nor live under the roof of any of his houses. Except that he cannot marry again whilst I live, he will be as free as he was before we unhappily met that autumn day upon the moors. I hope that you will tell him so from me. I shall take none of my jewels, nor shall I touch a farthing of my income from my settlements. What I have inherited from my father is quite enough for me to live upon. I have no children living, so there need be no question whatever of the interference of lawyers. I shall reside at the cottage at Christslea, so that you can all judge for yourselves that my manner of life is worthy of my father's memory. But I beg that you will none of you seek for a moment to attempt to change the resolution which I have taken, for it is unalterable, and interrogation and expostulation would be only unbearably painful to me. You will, I entreat, lay all blame which may be incurred

upon me. The world has always considered me ill-suited to him. It will not be astonished that a union so inharmonious should be ended by that want of sympathy and temper which it has always attributed to me. You have often reproached me with doing nothing to save your brother's honour. I now at least do what I can. You repeatedly condemned me for poor-spirited silence. Be sufficiently just not to condemn me now for acting as you have frequently more than hinted to me that I should do.'

The signature was Gladys Vernon.

When Hilda Sunbury had read the letter through to the end, her first impulse was to start at once for the south; the next moment she remembered that it was impossible and would be useless to do so; she could not leave Illington for any length of time with her house full without her absence being known; and what had been already done in Naples was hopeless and irrevocable. After an instant's meditation she sent for her eldest daughter.

'I have had news which must take me to Balfrons to-night,' she said to her daughter. 'You know my uncle is lying very ill there. I

do not wish anyone to know that I am absent. I shall return the day after to-morrow. You can say I am indisposed from cold and have to keep my room. Make no fuss. Amuse everyone. Be discreet, and do as you would do if I were here. I shall be back in thirty-six hours. Say nothing to your father. It is not worth while. He would only ask innumerable questions.'

Then with the utmost speed and quietness she left the house, drove seven miles to take the morning train to the north, succeeded in reaching it on the eve of its departure, and hastened as fast as steam could bear her across the length of England to where the mighty keep of Balfrons rose above its oak woods and faced the Cheviots. She knew that Aubrey was there.

With the open letter in her hand, she passed unannounced into the library where he was seated alone. He was at Balfrons for two days only. His father was ill, and was at that age when any slight illness may easily pass into the last ill of all. No one was staying at the Castle except the Duchess of Longleat and her two younger children.

He rose in amazement and alarm as his cousin entered, for it was nearly midnight.

‘Gladys?’ he asked instinctively, thrown off his guard.

Lady Sunbury cast down the letter on the table before him.

She was pale with passion, which she had nursed in all its heat and strength during the lonely hours in which she had sped through the cold dark winter country from Buckinghamshire to Berwick.

‘What did I say?’ she cried, her voice hoarse with fatigue and indignation. ‘Did I not always tell you that you would encourage her in her sentimental, headstrong, insensate follies until she would bring disgrace upon us all?’

Aubrey took up the letter, having in that moment’s pause recovered his self-possession.

“Disgrace” is a very large word, and not a common one in our families,’ he said slowly. ‘Let me see what she has said to warrant its use.’

He read the letter slowly, so slowly that Lady Sunbury’s impatience became well-nigh ungovernable. She did not know that every

word of it went to the innermost heart of the reader with that deepest of all sorrows—that which is powerless to aid the life beloved.

He held it in his hand when he had finished its perusal.

‘What is it you blame so much?’ he asked. His cousin, seated opposite to him at the great table at which he had been writing when she had entered, grew red with indignation and suppressed feeling.

‘What? what?’ she repeated. ‘Everything, surely everything, shows the most wanton disregard for us, the most theatrical resolution to obtain publicity, the most intolerable selfishness, the most obvious intent to ruin my brother in the world’s esteem! And to write it to me—to me! You are her confidant and confessor; you have always been so; why could she not send such a declaration of her projects to you, if sent it must be at all?’

‘It is natural that she should address you; a woman, and her sister-in-law,’ said Aubrey coldly. ‘But, pardon me, do you suppose such a deliberate resolution as this can be arrived at by anyone so young without some very great provocation to it? She does not say what it

is; but I imagine that both you and I can guess.'

Lady Sunbury's conscience stung her, remembering the scene which she had made to Gladys in the King's Alley at Ladysrood. But she was not a woman to acknowledge error.

'Very possibly she may have had things which pain her,' she said slightly. 'But other women have as much and more to pain them; and their sense of duty and of dignity serves to keep them silent.'

'Yes, they keep "silent" by leading a life of eternal disunion, bickering, and upbraiding as you do!' thought Aubrey as he answered aloud:

'I think you forget her youth; in youth these wrongs seem to fill heaven and earth; as women grow older they grow used to them, no doubt, as the camel grows to his burden. The letter seems to me irreproachable. She asks nothing; she demands nothing; she injures nothing; she sacrifices everything, and she allows you to place all the blame on her to the world. What can anyone do more generous than this? I fail to understand.'

'You mean to say that there is nothing to be done!' she exclaimed.

‘What should be done?’ said Aubrey, with the only impatience which had escaped him. ‘If a woman decides to leave her husband, and he decides to live so that she has no choice but to leave him, who is to reverse that position? They can reverse it themselves, as long as there is no legal separation.’

‘And she is to be allowed to live in this insane manner in solitude in her father’s cottage?’

‘No one can prevent her doing so but Guilderoy, and it seems to me that he has lost all possible title to command her even if he wishes to do so, while it is most probable that he does not. There is no disgrace in her limiting herself to her own resources; there is even a certain dignity in it, as I consider!’

‘Because you are bewitched and infatuated about her!’ said his cousin with rude contempt.

Aubrey kept his temper marvellously.

‘I believe I am neither one nor the other. I regretted her departure from England. At your request I endeavoured to dissuade her from it. I did not succeed. She was unhappy,

and when a woman is so she is never very wise. I conclude from this letter that on her arrival in Italy she learned what did not make her happier. The steps she takes are extreme, that I grant, but they only injure herself, and there is no one except her husband who can have any possible power to try and turn her from them.'

'He will not stoop to solicit a woman who leaves him.'

'Stoop! You speak as though he were faultless and she had committed some crime against him! You must know as well as I do that something much graver than his usual caprices must have moved her to write such a letter and take such a resolve. Do you suppose that a woman as young as she is voluntarily severs herself from all the pleasures, graces, and interests of life, unless life, as it is, has become wholly intolerable to her?'

'And her duties,' asked Hilda Sunbury, with violence, 'do they count for nothing? Is she to be allowed to play at tennis with the honour of my brother's family as her racquet?'

'My dear Hilda,' replied Aubrey wearily, 'you have always considered that all creation exists only for the honour of your family. To

others creation may still seem to have some additional, though no doubt minor, objects in view. However, even from that point, I scarcely concede that you can violently censure Lady Guilderoy. She offers you all possible occasion for examination into her life; she simply announces her intention of not living with your brother or in any of his houses. If he cares, he will seek to change her decision; if he does not care, he will necessarily be glad of it. Anyhow there need be no immediate scandal; at any rate unless you are pleased to make it.'

'I!' exclaimed his cousin, disbelieving her senses. 'What do I most abhor if not to have a single breath of the world breathed on me? What have I not endured that society should never suspect what I have suffered? What women have not I compelled myself to receive in my own homes in order that the outrages inflicted on me should not form food for social calumnies and ridicule? Who in the whole width of English society has been so constant and so resigned a martyr as myself to all the indignities which a man who does not respect himself does not hesitate to inflict on those whom he should respect? And then you presume to say that I—

I!—I, shall bring about scandal concerning my brother's wife! It is herself who brings it. How can a woman do what she is doing without bringing about her ears a thousand hornets' nests of curiosity and misconstruction? How? Will you tell me that?'

'The hornets' nests will come no doubt. They are everywhere,' said Aubrey, with a sigh of impatience. 'My dear Hilda, forgive me if I speak plainly; your own life has been a painful one; you have spent it in acrimony, reproaches, futile efforts to make black white, and endless quarrels which have never furthered your purpose one hair's breadth. Your brother's wife, being unhappy, chooses a more drastic but a more dignified vengeance. There would be a third way open to any woman who had the strength, the patience, and the unselfishness for it, and I could wish that she had taken it. I endeavoured to persuade her to take it; but she is young, and in youth and in pain the feelings are treacherous counsellors. What more is there to be said? It is to your brother that you must go. It is useless to come to me. I am not the guardian of Lady Guilderoy, nor am I my cousin's keeper. I have no more

whatsoever to do with this sad letter than my dog Hubert yonder. It is a mistake on her ~~side~~ ^{part}, an error, and a grave one; but he ~~has~~ brought it about by a much darker fault on his own, and he cannot complain. Neither you nor I can possibly interfere. We have no title to do so. If your brother acquiesce, all his relatives must acquiesce also. Of that no reasonable doubt can be urged for one moment.'

The great dog, hearing his name spoken, rose and approached, and laid his head upon Aubrey's knee; his master stroked him with a sigh.

Passionate and injurious words rose to Lady Sunbury's lips, but she repressed them unuttered; she was pale with rage and offence, but she had sense enough not to insult a man whom the nation respected.

'You cannot altogether disclaim responsibility for her actions,' she said with unkind and insolent meaning. 'You have guided them for a long time. You must pardon me if I do not credit that this letter and the resolutions contained in it are altogether so unfamiliar to you as they assume to be. You

were the last person who saw Lady Guilderoy in England, and everyone is aware that you have been for a long time her most cherished and trusted friend.'

Aubrey rose to the full height of his great stature, and stood at the end of the great library table as he had often stood at the table of the House of Commons.

'You are a woman and my cousin,' he said slowly. 'Both persons are privileged in you. But be so good as to remember that I do not allow even a lady to cast a doubt on what I have said was a fact ; and you will kindly take care not to hint the insult which you have just hinted outside the walls of Balfrons.'

She was imperious, courageous, and full of dark and insolent suspicion, but, bold though her temper was, and uncontrolled, she did not dare to affront or offend him farther, and she was silent.

'It is late,' said Aubrey. 'Allow me to accompany you to your rooms. You will see Ermyintrude in the morning. She retired very early, for she was fatigued with watching my father. To-night he is quieter and asleep.'

Then with all courtesy and ceremony he

waited on her across the halls and corridors and galleries of the great castle, and only bade her good-night at the entrance of that suite of rooms in the tapestried wing which were always set aside as hers, and which were warmed and illuminated for her now as though she had been expected there since noonday. He was not conscious that he had kept the letter from Gladys in his hand, and she had been too enraged and mortified to ask him for it.

He walked slowly back to his library in the midnight stillness ; everything was hushed into greater quiet than usual that the rest of the old Marquis might not be disturbed. The lamps burned white between the armoured figures, the drooping banners, the trophies of arms, the massive and fantastic carvings of the oak-pannelled walls ; his own steps sank soundless on the thick carpeting. Hubert followed him with noiseless velvet feet.

He paused before one of the great unshuttered casements, with their iron gratings, which had been there in the Wars of the Roses, and the blazonries of the House of Balfrons stained upon their glass. The night without was frosty and moonlit. There was snow on

the ground, and snow lay on the roof, the turrets, the corbels, the battlements of the mighty Border castle. The keep, round, massive, terrible-looking, like a fortress for giants in the starry night, towered up in front of him upon the other side of the quadrangle.

He had a deep and filial love for Balfrons, and if public life had not called on him for absence, he would seldom have left its treasure-house of books, and its great forests filled with wild cattle and red deer, and all water-birds and moor-birds which ever haunt the reedy meres of the old romantic Border lands.

He sat down in the embrasure of the window and read her letter over again, word for word, by the light of the lamp hanging above his head. There was not a sound in the house. The clouds swept past the casement in large moonlit, hurrying armies. The deep bell of the clock-tower tolled midnight.

Every word of the letter sank into his heart like a knife. Every word thrilled with the violence, the misery, the despair of a great pride which was writhing under abandonment, outrage, and misconception. The step she had

taken was unwise ; it had a child's rashness, a woman's obstinacy, and a forsaken woman's recklessness ; but there were a self-negation and an austerity in it which were in their error very noble, and touched chords in his own nature which responded to them.

‘I think she would have been happy with me,’ he thought ; and he sighed as he looked out at the cold and luminous night and the great keep towering to the skies.

But now, though he would have laid down his life to save her, he could not give her one hour of peace. A furious longing came over the calm, grave temper of Aubrey to cast all other considerations, public and private, to the winds, and avenge her wrongs upon his cousin with the rude, frank championship of another age and country than their own. But reflection told him that such an act could do her only harm : could only give her name more completely to the world's tongues, and could only possibly awaken in her husband's mind doubts which would dishonour her, and give him, in his own eyes, a palliative for his own offence against her.

‘I have no title to interfere,’ he thought

sadly. 'I am not her lover. Scarcely even did she at last accept me as her friend.'

A thrill of what was to him degrading and criminal, because a selfish pleasure, passed through him at the memory of the utter loneliness to which she had condemned herself, the dangers, the barrenness of the future which she had shaped for herself. But he hated the cruel egotism of the thought; he spurned and checked it as it rose in him.

'How vile we are at heart!' he mused with disgust and shame for the momentary selfish hope which had intruded themselves on him in his own despite. 'How odiously vile!—and yet God knows if I could by any personal sacrifice purchase her happiness there is none at which I would hesitate.'

But what sacrifice could avail anything? Her happiness and her wretchedness lay in other hands than his.

CHAPTER XLVIII.

It was a winter's day when the woman whom he loved reached the little cottage at Christslea, having travelled without ceasing, pausing only for one night in Rome, the night in which she had written the letter to her sister-in-law.

The bay was shrouded in the white fogs of a damp December ; the waves were rolling heavily with a deep roar upon the beach ; the winds were sighing amongst the leafless orchards and over the bare scarps of the cliffs.

She went into the little study, still crowded with her father's books and papers, and bolted the door, and sat down before the fire on the lonely hearth. All was still, grey, inexpressibly solitary. The little place was gay and fragrant and pleasant in summer time, when the hedges were full of the songs of birds, and the air full of the scent of wallflowers and stocks blossoming in the homely garden ways ; but it was

intensely melancholy in the winter season, with the silence of mist and cold brooding over its solitudes.

She shuddered as she looked at the narrow casements, where the glass was wet with the vapours of the morning, and the grey veiled landscape was dull and blotted like a drawing soaked in rain. It seemed an emblem of her future existence. She for the first time realised the choice which she had made, the thing which she had done.

From the time she had left the palace in Naples until she arrived here she had had no distinct sense of what had happened to her. She had been sustained by the violence and the fever of an intense passion, by the iron in her soul of an immense wrong; she had gathered a fictitious strength from the magnanimity and the dignity of her choice, and the calmness with which she had spoken to her husband had lasted throughout her journey homeward until this moment, when, having dismissed the servants who had accompanied her in London, she had come wholly alone to the little house where her father's memory was her sole companion, and would be her sole

consolation in the future. Then, when, not heeding or replying to the startled and agitated questions of the two old people left in charge there, she came into this chamber where her father's presence seemed a living and near thing, the sense of all she had given up, of all she had accepted, came to her for the first time in all its nakedness and horror.

She did not regret what she had done : she would have done it again had she been called on to ratify her choice : it seemed to her the only thing which was left for her to do in common honour and in common courage ; yet the pale and ghastly terror of it faced her on the threshold of this chamber like some ghastly shape. The want of the one familiar voice so often heard there, the one unfailing tenderness so often proved there, overcame her with the sickliness of irrevocable loss. The pale grey walls, the pallid vellum volumes, the white discoloured manuscripts, the dull misty windows, the cold hearth, seemed to her like so many mourners mourning with her.

‘ Father, father ! ’ she cried piteously to the blankness which was around her ; the silence alone echoed the cry.

With a gesture of agonised supplication, of heart-breaking prayer, she stretched her arms out, seeking some shelter, some embrace, some kindly hand. The narrow walls of the little book-room went round and round giddily before her sight ; the casements narrowed into a single point of light. She fell face forward senseless upon the floor, and a great darkness like night closed in on her.

When she recovered consciousness she was lying on the little bed which had been hers in childhood, and she saw the withered brown face of the old woman who had kept house there from her earliest memories stooping above her in anxiety and wonder. She did not speak, she did not move ; she lay still and gazed at the whitewashed walls, the sloping ceiling, the narrow lattice ; and she remembered to what a future she had condemned herself. She saw always before her the face of her husband as she had seen it in the light and shadow of the Italian moonlight—cold, pale, angry, handsome—his eyes resting on her without a ray of tenderness in them, his lips speaking passionate declarations of his loyalty to her rival.

The long swoon, which had frightened the people of the house, had been due to cold, fatigue, long fasting, and great emotion. It left no evil result after it, and with a new and strange weakness making her limbs tremble and her brain turn, she went down the narrow stair in the morning light to take up that life which was henceforth to be her portion.

There was a fire burning on the study hearth, and the old folks had set some homely winter flowers in the grey Flemish jugs on the centre table. The pale sunshine of a fine wintry day was falling on the black and white lines of her father's drawings on the walls. She sank into his large writing chair before the table on which his last written sheet, with the pen on it, lay as he had left them on his last day of life, and she tried to realise this catastrophe which had befallen her, this earthquake which had shaken into ruins all her summer world.

The violent agitations which had followed on her arrival in Naples, the hurried and scarcely conscious journey homeward, the suddenness and irrevocableness of her own actions, had given her a stunned and bewildered

feeling like that of a sleeper roused from his dreams to hear of some misfortune rudely told.

She had written her letter to her sister-in-law with clearness, force, and calmness, but with that effort her nerves had given way ; a burning fever, a painful sense of exhaustion, had followed on it, and though she had controlled all outward sign of them until her arrival at Christslea, they left her enfeebled and unnerved. She was terrified by the violence of the passions which she felt, and which had been intensified by the control over them which she had maintained whilst in her husband's presence.

‘ Am I no better than this ? ’ she thought, ashamed and appalled at the furies which raged in her breast. She leaned over the fire, shivering and hot by turns as if with ague. She did not regret her choice ; she had no other which would have seemed to her endurable ; but the horror of her future was very ghastly to her, and as she sat alone in the little dull room, with the rime frost white on the panes of the window and the noise of the waves coming up through the silence, the memory of the gay southern sunshine in which she had

left him, the perfumed air, the sparkling seas, the shores of the Sirens, was ceaselessly before her, and life seemed to her a burden too intolerable to be borne.

The slow dark day wore on; the clock ticked off its tedious hours; the fire burned bright or burned dull; there was no other change. The old dog who had been at her father's feet in his last moments lay beside her, lifting every now and then drowsy and tender eyes to her face. They brought her food, but she could not take it. She drank a cup of milk: that was all. She took up her father's Virgil, and tried to read the passages in which she had been used to take most delight, but she could make no sense of the familiar lines; the letters swam before her sight, and she laid the book down with a sick despair.

Would all her life be like this?—with every interest of art and intellect, every innocent pleasure of nature, every harmless charm of existence, made void and useless to her?

‘Ah, how little my dear father knew!’ she thought, seeing the red embers of the hearth through blinding tears. He had bade her make her love so great that no other woman

could give its equal. What use were that? What avail to pour out gold at the feet of him who only sees in it mere dross?—to offer the universe to one who is only impatient of the gift?

There was nothing in her that her husband cared for ; what mattered it to him that she was altogether his, body and soul? He would in all likelihood be more grateful to her for an infidelity which should set him wholly free.

CHAPTER XLIX.

As she sat thus till the sombre day grew to the third hour after noon, she heard the latch of the garden lifted and a man's footsteps crush the wet shingle of the pathway to the porch.

She rose, breathless, her heart beating to desperation with the wildness of a sudden hope.

She thought it possible that Guilderoy might have followed her there, might have repented of his choice, might have come to offer her his atonement and regret.

A terrible disappointment blanched her white face whiter still as the door opened, and she saw in the shadow of the passage-way beyond the lofty statue of Aubrey.

He was the best friend that she had on earth, but had he been her cruellest enemy the sight of him could not have hurt her more than it did then.

Aubrey came up to her and took her hands in his with unutterable tenderness and compassion.

‘My poor child—my poor darling—how I grieve for you,’ he said with broken voice.

Then she knew that he must have read the letter which she had written in Rome.

‘Yes, Hilda showed me your letter,’ he said, answering the interrogation of her regard. ‘It shocked me. I would have given my right hand that you had not written it, still more that you had not been caused to write it. For it is a fatal error, Gladys.’

‘I could do no less,’ she said coldly. The reaction of the intense hope which had for a moment leaped up in her made her feel sick and faint; she disengaged her hands from his, and seated herself by the hearth in the great chair, her back almost turned to him.

‘You could have done nothing at all. It would have been wiser,’ he said with infinite pity. ‘My dear,’ he added reproachfully, ‘only think what it is that you have done. What will you have made of your life? Could you not have had a little faith in my warnings?’

She hardened her heart against her truest

friend ; she gathered her pride about her coldly and stiffly ; she saw in him only the messenger and mouthpiece of her husband's family.

‘I have done nothing that any of Lord Guilderoy's friends can blame,’ she answered. ‘I have said nothing to any one of all my acquaintances, and I shall say nothing to any of them. I only ask to be left alone. I am sure that I am living as my father would have wished me to live, and I shall spend nothing but that which he has left me.’

She spoke in a measured and constrained voice as to a stranger. She could not forgive Aubrey what she thought his preference of his cousin's cause and desertion of her own.

‘You have done most unwisely,’ he said, with a sigh. ‘I am not defending my cousin, God forbid ! He is beyond all defence, all excuse, and I should be ashamed to attempt to give him either ; but you would have had fuller sympathy from the world at large and greater comfort, I think, in your own thoughts if you had taken no active part in the destruction of your ties to him.’

‘I did nothing more than was my right,’ she said coldly.

‘That I do not dispute. But, as I told you, a woman’s rights are her rashest councillors. After all, dear, what has one human being of real “right” over any other’s life? To claim affection is idle. If it be no longer ours we must break our hearts as we will. We cannot bridle the winds. We must wait in patience till they blow again whither we would have them.’

‘Then no woman must ever listen to the words of any man!’

‘I did not mean that. I meant that when we have the calamity to be loved no more we must revile neither man nor woman, we must look within. Maybe we shall there see the cause of our woe.’

She flushed hotly with anger.

‘How have I been to blame? It is not my fault that his caprice only lived a day.’

Aubrey was silent. She understood that his silence was blame.

‘You are unjust, like all his family,’ she said passionately. ‘I have made no scandal, no exposure, no publicity. I shall make

none. What more can his friends demand? He is left in peace with the only woman whom he loves!’

‘My dearest Gladys,’ said Aubrey wearily, ‘I am not defending him. It has gone hard with me not to revenge you with old-fashioned violence which would have made him pay for your tears with his body. You may believe that not to do so has been the greatest effort of my life.’

Her eyes softened and grew dim.

‘Is that really true?’

‘I do not say what is not true, dear.’

She stretched her hand out to him. ‘I thank you very much,’ she said in a broken voice.

Aubrey kissed her hands with reverence and an emotion which he endeavoured to subdue.

‘I am no lover or knight, my dear,’ he said sadly, ‘and the publicity of my life makes indulgence in romance impossible to it; but I should be less than a man if I did not feel for you the deepest, the most indignant sympathy. That your wound should have been dealt you by one of my kindred makes me feel it like a personal dishonour——’

He paused, and with a strong effort controlled, unuttered, words of greater tenderness and fuller confession.

‘But I will tell you honestly,’ he added, after a pause, ‘that I regret and blame your actions. They will cost you dear, and you have not measured the price of them. There is much that is fine and even heroic in yours. But can you honestly say, dear, that you believe your father, were he standing here now, would tell you that you had done well or wisely?’

She was silent. She was too truthful to assert a belief which she could not entirely feel.

‘You cannot; for he was a wise and good man. He knew that women are always their own enemies when they follow the dictates of pride, and of pique, and of jealousy. Pardon me if these words seem unfeeling; they are inadequate to express the great wrong that you suffer from, but after all they are the only ones which can describe the impulses which you have acted on now.’

‘May there not be such things as outraged decency and delicacy and indignant honour?’

‘Yes, no doubt; who could deny them? But feeling alone is the most dangerous of guides. It drowns us in deep waters while we think ourselves safe on dry land. You imagined you were sparing Guilderoy the comment of the world; on the contrary, the world blames him and blames you equally, and through you, where it would only have seen a mere passing difference, will now see a scandalous and unalterable offence.’

‘I cannot help it if his passions are so made that they do not last a year; if it is what he has not which always seems so much better than what he has. It is not my fault if he married me as he would buy a *cocotte* and tired of me as he would tire of her. I have released him as far as I can possibly release him until death takes me. I will not eat of his bread, or live under his roof. I will not wear a gown he paid for, nor a ring he purchased; even my marriage ring I threw down before him—he did not even see it—what did he care? He was only thinking of her; sighing for her because she had the wit to assume indifference to him!’

She spoke with violence and with vehement

scorn ; he had never seen her so strongly moved before, often as he had had to soothe her indignation and persuade her into peace.

All that she had endured in silence since she had left Naples broke out in these the first words which she had been able to pour into the ear of any listener.

He stroked her hair tenderly as he might have touched the hair of a suffering child.

‘Calm yourself, my dear,’ he said gently. ‘Many women suffer what you suffer now. Only believe me, the remedy you have chosen is one which will harass and deepen your wound and never heal it. You have called the world in as your physician. It is one which kills and does not cure.’

‘Perhaps it would be best that I should kill myself ; I have thought of it often. But I always remember that my father thought suicide a cowardice. Sometimes I am inclined to do it, it would set him free. Perhaps he would think of me with kindness if I were dead.’

‘And are there none who would regret you more than that ?’ said Aubrey with a rebuke in his voice which he could not restrain.

‘No ; why should they ? If I am nothing to him I am nothing to any one.’

She spoke wearily, listlessly, thinking only of herself. Aubrey’s heart beat quickly ; he said nothing, and she did not look at his face.

There was long silence between them, filled only by the lulling noises of the sea.

‘It is impossible that you can remain here !’ he said abruptly at last. ‘You are too young, twenty years too young. You wish to stay the tongues of the world ; what can set them in full cry like such an act as this ?’

‘They will say I am cold and odd. They have said so very often before. That is the worst they can say—I have never heeded it.’

‘It is not the worst ! They will attribute motives to you of which you do not dream.’

‘What motives ?’

‘My dear ! when a woman does not live with her husband, society is always sure that she lives with some one else. You force me to be brutally sincere.’

Her cheeks flushed ; she raised her head with hauteur.

‘My life is free to all his family to observe.

There is no concealment in it. It is as plain to be seen as the white face of that cliff.'

'That is the sublime madness of innocence! The more open, simple, and harmless it actually is, the more will the world be certain that it conceals a secret and an intrigue.'

'That must be as it may. My own conscience is enough for me. And surely you forget; the world knows—it cannot choose but know—that Lord Guilderoy finds his happiness elsewhere.'

'And the world, which is always ready to excuse the man and accuse the woman, will very possibly say that it is pardonable he should do so, because—who knows what devilry they will not say? Only of this you may be very sure, that they will never believe that a woman of your years voluntarily shuts herself in such solitude as this without consolation.'

'They can believe what they please. If they place the blame on me, not on him, I shall have done what my father always bade me do—bear his faults for him. I shall receive no one. It is impossible that calumny can invent anything, unless they find sin in the gulls of the air and suspicion in the rabbits of the moors.'

‘They will find it even in these, doubt not, rather than find it nowhere.’

‘They must do so then.’

‘You are cruel and perverse.’

‘I do not mean to be either. But I will not reside in any one of your cousin’s houses, nor will I touch any shilling of my dower from him. I am nothing to him. He is nothing to me. I only still keep his name because I cannot be relieved of it without publicity, nor even with publicity, I believe, as the laws of marriage stand.’

‘No, you could not. And you would not free yourself if you could.’

‘Why do you say so?’

‘Because you always care for him. Some day you will pardon him, some day he will ask you to do so, and such forgiveness will be the renewal of affection.’

‘Never!’

‘Oh, my child! how long does a woman’s “never” last? So long as the man whom she loves does not kneel at her feet, and no longer.’

The colour deepened in her face.

‘What you say to me is an insult. I have no feeling for the lover of the Duchess Sorìa ;

or, if I have, I pray God night and day to tear it from my heart, for it is dishonour—abasement—ignominy! When I forget it or forgive it, you may tear my heart out of my body and throw it to the hounds of Balfrons!’

‘Do not make rash vows, my dear,’ said Aubrey gently. ‘Women forgive everything when they really love.’

‘No—no—not that!’

‘Oh, yes, and far worse than that. What use is love if it be not one long pardon?’

‘Then it is one long weakness!’

‘Or one long and inexhaustible pity—one long and infinite strength.’

There was a tone in his voice which soothed the passionate unrest and indignation of her soul. It seemed to her as though she heard her father’s voice speaking by Aubrey’s lips.

‘You are good,’ she said wistfully. ‘I wish you had loved me and I you.’

The words were as innocent as though a child had spoken them, but they tried the forbearance of the hearer of them with a cruel martyrdom.

He rose hastily, glanced at the dusky

shadows of the declining day, and bade her a hurried farewell.

‘You will come and see me often?’ she asked him, as she held his hand in hers. He looked away from her.

‘As often as I can, dear. You know I have so little time for my own affairs. You shall always know where I am, so that you may send to me in a moment if you need. Adieu. Believe me your firmest friend, even though I am no flatterer and do not pretend to approve you in what you now do. I will write often to you, and you will write to me. I hope that you will soon write to tell me that you renounce this cruel choice of life.’

The calm and unimpassioned words cost him much in their utterance. He longed to offer her his life, his soul, his endless devotion, to put away all national needs and duties from him and cleave only to her, if he could comfort her or atone to her in any way; but he resisted the temptation and left her with kind and tranquil farewell. He knew that her heart was not his, he believed that it would never be his; he scorned to try to persuade her that indignation and revenge and loneli-

ness and gratitude mingled together could ever make fair counterfeit of love. The lesson might be taught perhaps with time. A bruised heart is often like a wounded bird ; it falls to the first hand which closes on it ; but he thought that such affection would never be love in any sense, in any shape ; he believed that all of love which would ever stir in her breast was now and would be ever given to the man who had abandoned her.

Other men, more easily contented and of less susceptible honour than he, might have endeavoured to supply the lost passion, to replace the perished joys ; to persuade her that all she felt of bitterness and wrong could be most deeply and surely, and most thoroughly in kind, avenged by the acceptance of other sympathies and other affections than those which were denied her.

But Aubrey's were not the lips to utter these persuasions or these sophisms ; nor would he, well as he loved her, have cared ever to accept the mere fruits of a tortured jealousy and humiliation, which in their sufferings might have imagined themselves love.

As he left Christslea he looked across the

misty wintry wold, across to the horizon, where the brown woods, the shining roofs, and the many spires and towers of Ladysrood were faintly visible on the grey clouded edge of the far moors.

Its master had left his fairest treasure unguarded and unremembered, thought Aubrey; if any bore it away from him whom could he blame but himself?

CHAPTER L.

THE days and weeks and months drifted on ; the chilly spring, the uncertain summer, the stormy autumn of an English year succeeded one another, and the dawn broke and the night fell over the lonely shore of Christleale, bringing no change in the monotony of Gladys' existence.

Guilderoy remained out of England. The world, with its usual discrimination, pitied him and blamed Aubrey.

'*Vox Fæminæ vox Dei*,' and women without exception took part against Gladys whenever they now remembered her at all, which was but seldom. They were all of them certain that she could have been entirely happy with her husband had she chosen, since he was always so charming ; it was her want of amiability and of tact, they agreed, which had caused his errors. No one with such exquisite

manners as his could be otherwise than most easy to live with ; ah ! why had he thrown himself away on any one so utterly unsympathetic ?

Here and there some man who had always admired her beauty, or who had reasons of his own for knowing that Guilderoy was not a faithful husband or a constant lover, lifted up his voice in her defence ; but such a one was always in a very narrow majority, and rallied few to his opinions.

Hilda Sunbury, moreover, had pronounced against her sister-in-law : that was quite enough to condemn her. She was not, indeed, at ease in her own conscience for having done so ; but that society did not know. She was a woman of honesty of purpose and rectitude of character. She was aware that she had been the primary cause of the final separation between Guilderoy and his wife, and she was constantly haunted by Vernon's farewell words. But her dislike to the mistress of Ladysrood had been stronger than her candour or her justice ; her prejudices for her family were stronger than her regard for pure truth. She had the power of swaying

her world in favour of her brother to the injury of his wife, and she exercised the power, indifferent to the claims of innocence and right.

‘I always knew you were an unsympathetic woman, but I never thought that you were an unscrupulous one until now,’ Aubrey said to her unsparingly in that London world which she was using all the force of her unimpeachable position and her distinguished virtue to turn against her brother’s wife.

‘I say what I believe,’ she replied, with chilly dignity and great untruth.

‘Ask your God to forgive you for your thoughts, then,’ said Aubrey.

He felt all the disgust of a man who knows the innocence of a woman before the calumny of her by other women.

He knew that Hilda Sunbury in her soul was as fully aware of the purity of her brother’s wife as he was; and her efforts to stain the whiteness of Gladys’ name, that her brother’s faults might be dealt with leniently by the world, seemed to him as dark a crime as any murder; almost worse than crime, because more cowardly, since secure from all punishment. He himself was powerless to avenge it.

Any protest of his made the position of the one whom he desired to protect more questionable.

Almost every one believed that he was her lover : he felt that, though no hint of it could ever be given to him. He knew it by the silence of others about her to him and before him ; he knew it by that instinct with which both men and women of sensitive temperament become conscious of the opinion of their society about them, even when it is most carefully hidden from them. He knew it by the unwillingness of his sister, once so warmly her friend, to speak at all of Gladys to him.

There is a silence around us at times upon the name dearest to us which tells us without words that others know that it is thus dear.

More than once he was tempted to write to or seek out Guilderoy ; but he felt that by him, as by society at large, his interference on behalf of Gladys would be at once suspected and disregarded, might injure her greatly, and could do her no possible service.

And his wrath was so bitter against one who could remain absent, lulled in voluptuous pleasures, whilst her life was beating

itself as painfully against its prison bars as any bird's, that he felt incapable of preserving any measure in rebuke, or even insult, if he once allowed himself to address his cousin either by spoken or by written word. Any quarrel between them would become of necessity national property for public comment. Rank, like guilt, 'hath pavilions but no privacy.'

Meanwhile, despite all, she herself did not repent her choice. She would not, for all that the world could have given her, have continued to dwell in his house and spend his income. She would not at any price have borne the constant stare of wonder or the semi-smile of pity with which she would have been met in society by those whose spoken words would only have been of homage or of courtesy. Of all unendurable positions hers would have been the most painful, had she been living amongst his acquaintances and friends. Here at least she had such kind of tranquillity as solitude can afford. The fisher people on the shore asked her no questions; the bright bold eyes of the orchard birds had no cruel curiosity in them; and the unobtrusive councils written on the pages of the dead

men of old had no inquisitiveness or censure underlying them as those of living speakers would have had. She was glad of such isolation, as all those who suffer from humiliation as well as from calamity are glad of it. But it seemed to her as if the whole world were dead, and she alone living in it.

All that stir and blaze and noise and change and pomp and pageantry of society, in which she had dwelt ever since her marriage, were all gone as though she had never known them. A silence like that of a tomb seemed always around her. The steep white cliffs which rose in a semicircle around Christslea were like the walls of a dungeon. She heard nothing from the misty dawns until the starless nights, except the rolling up of the waves upon the sands, the cry of the owls flitting at dusk amongst the boughs, the distant shouts of the crews in the fishing cobbles out at sea, or the shrill weak voices of the old man and woman of the house garrulously quarrelling over their work in garden, kitchen, cellar, or apple-house.

Sometimes it seemed to her as if the years

of her life with Guilderoy had been only the mere dream of a night. She felt material losses, too, which it humiliated her to acknowledge. The homely and simple ways of life at Christslea were irksome and barren to her. All which she had despised, whilst she had enjoyed them, of the beauty, the graces, and the luxuries of existence were now lacking to her, and she missed them with a continual sense of need of them which surprised and mortified her. She had believed herself wholly indifferent to those mere externals; those elegances and indulgences which in the imagined asceticism of her renunciation she had counted as wholly unnecessary to her. She missed them at every turn, at every moment; she realised how much they contributed to the ease and grace if not to the happiness of existence. Her father had voluntarily resigned them all, and no expression of regret for them had ever escaped his lips, and she had fancied that she could imitate his philosophy. But the youth and the sex in her had not either his resignation or his endurance; and she suffered from the mere physical and material deprivation of her solitude as he had never done, having attained the tran-

quillity of middle age and of a scholar's stoicism. She had overestimated her own strength, and underrated the power of memory and desire.

The little lonely house which had been the heaven of her childhood was the prison of her body and her spirit now. She had force of character enough to make her adhere to her decision, but she had not coldness of nature enough to make her at peace in it. She had known all the fullest joys of the passions, and all that the world could give of pleasure and of admiration. She could not resign herself to these empty, joyless, stupid, eventless hours which succeeded each other with eternal monotony as the lengths of grey worsted rolled off the ball with which the old housekeeper knitted hose from noon to night, by the hearth in winter and by the porch in summer.

It was in vain that she strove to find those consolations in study which her father had never failed to find ; in vain that she opened the black-letter folios and the Latin volumes in which, as a child, she had thought it her dearest privilege to read ; in vain that even in her father's

own manuscripts she found nothing of wisdom although their precepts of patience were as true as those of Publius Syrus. In vain did she seek those calm and golden counsels; they fell cold as icy water on the heat and pain of her restless suffering. When she looked off from the written or the printed words she saw the face of her rival, and she heard the voice of her husband saying always, 'She is the only woman whom I have ever loved. God help me!'

Often she pushed the books and papers aside, and went out in all weathers, when the white rain was driving in fury over the moors, and when the waves were rising in a wall of foam to break in thunder on the beach.

Nothing hurt her. She returned home often drenched to the skin, but she took no harm. Great pain, like great happiness, often bestows an almost more than mortal immunity from all bodily ailments. 'And I am always well!' she sometimes thought, almost in anger with nature for its too abundant gifts to her of health and strength.

'He will think I do not care,' she

said to herself bitterly, ‘because I do not die!’

She knew that, with a man’s hasty and superficial judgment, he was very likely to think so if he thought of her at all.

From the summit of the moor which rose behind the house she could see Ladysrood in the far distance. On the rare days of sunshine the gilded vanes and the zinc roofs glittered in distant points of light above the woods. The great house was left to that silence and darkness which had been so often its portion in other years. Once or twice some of the old servants came to Christslea and begged to see her, for she was beloved by the household ; but she did not encourage them to return. She had sent for her dogs, and for some of her books from there ; that was all. She would not even have any of her clothes. With an exaggeration of feeling, which even to Aubrey seemed morbid and overstrained, she stripped herself of everything which had become hers by her union with Guilderoy, and wore the plainest and the cheapest apparel that she could find. But the beautiful and symmetrical lines of her form gave their own nobility to those

humble stuffs ; and in her rough serge, white or black, she had no less distinction than she had had in her pearl-sown velvet train at a state ball.

The insincerities, the conventionalities, and the feigned friendships of society had always been painful and oppressive to her, even when she had been comparatively happy amongst them. In her present circumstances they would have been an intolerable torture. She had her father's sensitive horror of compassion and of comment, and if alone and wretched at Christslea she was at the least unmolested. Her retirement had been a nine days' wonder to her acquaintances ; in a short time other mysteries, other scandals, other interests took its place : she was not there, others were. Society, with the indifference which follows its curiosity as surely as night follows day, ceased to speak of her, and almost forgot that she existed.

She had been left unopposed to abide by the choice she had made ; and of her husband she heard nothing. He had passed out of her existence as utterly as though he lay in his grave like her father.

‘If he were dead they would tell me,’ she thought : if he were dead they would remember, for a day at least, that she was his wife.

Unconsciously to herself, her selection of Christslea, amongst other reasons, had been actuated by the sense that there at least she would be sure to hear if any accident or illness befell him. She could not bring herself to ask for tidings of him even of Aubrey ; but she knew that the lord of Ladysrood could have no great ill happen to him without such at once becoming the common talk of the whole country side. Day and night she thought of him as she had last seen and heard him, passionately declaring to her his preference of her rival and his allegiance to her. Yet even in that moment he had seemed to her stronger, manlier, more worthy, than he had seemed to her before in the incessant duplicities and the half-hearted intrigues of his other and less open infidelities. At least there was on his lips no lie, and in his acts no subterfuge.

Even in the agony of the jealousy and the indignity which consumed her, she reached some faint perception of what her father

had meant when he had bade her attain a love which could see as God saw, and pardon as men hope that their God pardons them. But it was only in brief, far separated, intervals that such perception came to her; for the most part she was devoured by those burning tortures of jealous imaginations which make every moment of existence almost insupportable to those they torment.

She recovered her bodily strength quickly; she had too perfect health for it to be easily overcome by any suffering of the mind or of the senses; the vigorous and abounding life which filled her veins became a cruel mockery of the weariness and barrenness of her empty days and her starved affections. When she had thought of Christslea as a haven of rest in which she could let her sick soul lie hidden in peace, she had remembered it as it had been with her father's presence filling it as with the benign and cheerful light of spiritual sunshine. She had forgotten that without him it could be only a lonely and dreary cottage like any other, a bald, poor, empty life, lived out face to face with eternal losses and eternal regrets.

What had been left her through her father was a trifle indeed ; no more than one of the head servants of Ladysrood was paid a year ; but it was enough for such few wants as her life here comprised, and the rental of the cottage she paid into the hands of the steward every three months.

‘ My lord does not permit me to receive it,’ said the steward, in infinite perplexity and distress.

‘ But I insist that you shall take it,’ she replied. ‘ Pay it into the poor-box of Ladysrood parish church if you can do nothing else.’

And it was paid to the poor accordingly. She would not owe to him one square inch of the soil in which the stocks and the sweet-briar grew. Everything that was not the gift of her father, or of Aubrey and his sister, she had left behind her ; all her costly wardrobes, her furs, her laces, her fans, her pictures, her jewels of all sorts, remained in his houses where they were, locked up in their chests and cabinets and cases, and the keys were deposited with his men of business.

‘You have acted as though you were guilty, and not he,’ Aubrey said to her again and again, remonstrating with what seemed to him exaggerated feeling.

‘I could not have borne my life if I had kept any single thing of his,’ she answered, with an energy which was almost violence. ‘Everything he ever gave me is at Ladysrood, from my bridal pearls down to the last gift he bought for me.’

‘I do not deny that there is nobility and renunciation in your withdrawal into this obscurity and beggary,’ replied Aubrey, ‘but it is a mistake. It has made a thing which the world need never have known become inevitably the world’s talk. It may sound priggish, pretentious, or unfeeling perhaps, my dear, if I say so, but I have always held that people of our order have no right to gratify their own private vengeance, or even set themselves free from painful obligation, if by so doing they bring the name they represent upon the common tongues of the crowd. This is the sense of the old *noblesse oblige*. We do not belong only to ourselves. We are a part of the honour of our nations. When we do anything on the spur of

personal passion or personal injury, which brings those whose name we bear into dispute, we are faithless to our traditions and our trusts.'

She sighed heavily, and the tears rolled off her lashes down her cheeks. She knew that he was right; no appeal to dignity and honour could leave untouched the inmost chords of the heart of John Vernon's daughter.

'I will never do anything to lower his name myself,' she said, with emotion. 'Never, let me suffer what I may.'

'Of that I am sure,' replied Aubrey; 'but without thought you have done what must inevitably draw the comment and the censure of the world upon you both.'

'Not I. It was not my fault, though I have taken all blame for it. He had left me openly for her; he had resolved to do so before I set foot in Naples.'

'It need never have been known to the world in general if you had continued to be the mistress of his houses, and with time you might have regained his affections.'

A hot blush of deepest anger scorched up the tears upon her cheeks. 'I could not live

like that ; I would not exist a day in such hypocrisy and degradation.'

'Why will you talk of death, my dear? you will outlive me and Guilderoy by many years. You are hardly more than a child still.'

'And do not children die? It is true death never takes those who wish for it ; and I am always well—cruelly well—absurdly well !'

'That is ungrateful to fate, my dear. Would you be happier if you were lying on a sick-bed, paralysed with bodily pains torturing you, as well as mental?'

'It would be a less harsh contrast. Oh, yes! I know that I am thankless, ungracious, wicked, I dare say ; but when I feel such perfect health in me, such untiring strength, I wonder what are the use of them, why they stay with me, why they could not make my little children strong enough too, so that they might have lived. His sister always says it was my fault that they died. I do not think it was.'

'Yes ; I wish your children had lived. You would not have severed your life from his then?'

'Oh, yes, I should. I should have done

just the same ; only I should have had them with me. He would not have taken them away from me. I heard him say once that a man was a brute who could take her children from any woman, at any age, whatever the law might allow to him.'

Aubrey looked at her in surprise.

'My dear, when you can recognise qualities and feelings in him like this, why did you not have more patience with him? Human nature cannot give unalloyed excellence, and human affections should not expect it. In what we love we are sure to find grave faults, and faults which often are of the kind which we of all others most disparage ; but we must accept them just as we would accept blindness or lameness, or any physical accident in the person we loved.'

'That depends on the character of the faults.'

'Does it not rather depend on our own character? I admit that what is vile or utterly false and feeble will kill affection, because it destroys the very roots in which it is planted. But the infidelities of the passions and the waywardness of the instincts are not sins so

dark as to be unpardonable ; they are, indeed, faults almost inseparable from manhood.'

She looked at him wistfully.

'You would be faithful to any woman you loved, I think?'

'There is no question of myself,' said Aubrey impatiently. 'I have had no time for the soft follies of life, and my mistress is England, who is a very exacting one. The question, under consideration now, is of my cousin. His offences against you are very grave; but they are of a kind which you must have learned enough in these years to know are inseparable from such a temperament as his, and which I think every woman should force herself to overlook.'

'If she felt herself in the least loved by him or necessary to him, yes,' she answered, with force and emotion. 'All the question lies there. If he had ever loved me I might believe that he might care for me more or less again. But I knew—I knew almost at once—that he never did. As far as he can love at all he loves her. I am nothing to him but a person who is in the way; who prevents him from marrying her; who encumbers his life and

draws down unpleasant comments on him from the world. You cannot alter that. There is nothing to touch or to appeal to in it.'

'I think that you mistake, that you exaggerate. Look in your mirror, and see if you are a woman to whom a man so susceptible to female charms as he is, can ever be wholly indifferent.'

She smiled sadly, with that premature knowledge of the world which had so embittered her life with its disillusion.

'If I were a stranger or a mere acquaintance I should have charm for him perhaps. Surely, my friend, you must understand that, being what I am to him, I have none.'

He looked at her again ; they were walking by the edge of the cliff behind the house in one of the rare hours in which he permitted himself to visit her. It was a rough, rude day, with boisterous winds and a high sea tumbling black and frothy far down below them. The mists hung heavily over the inland landscape, and all the northern horizon, where the woods of Ladysrood were, was hidden by a white thick fog. But on the table-land of the cliffs the breeze was blowing strongly, and it gave

warmth to her cheeks and brilliancy to her eyes, and blew some of the short waves of her hair in disorder upon her forehead. The wind, and the cold, and the air from the sea, lent her a vividness of colouring and of expression which for the moment banished the gloom and sadness which were now habitual on her face.

‘If he could see her now,’ thought Aubrey, ‘surely he would come back to her.’

He turned his own eyes from her and gazed out over the stormy sea, afraid of the emotions into which he might be hurried.

His position grew daily more and more difficult as sole counsellor and friend of the deserted wife of his own cousin; more and more painful to himself and invidious before others. Though passion had had little place in his life, his nature was far from passionless, and he realised that the time might come when it would be impossible to him longer to preserve this attitude of calm, paternal affection towards her.

With all the unconsciousness of a woman whose thoughts and feelings are centred elsewhere, she unwittingly tempted him and tortured him a hundred times an hour. The

very pleasure with which she welcomed him ; the sense she often expressed to him that he was her one consolation and protection, the instinct of confidence in which she turned to and leaned on him in her loneliness, appealed more than any other thing could have done to a man of his merciful and magnanimous temperament. But they also tried his self-control more cruelly than any other things, and often made him dread that his voluntarily accepted office would be one beyond his force.

All the public obligations and national interests with which his life was filled, although they gave him that hold on duty and on honour which it would have been a crime in his eyes to relax, his position before the country being the conspicuous one which it was, they yet could not still in him either the rebellion of chained passions or the natural yearnings of the heart.

He was a man of higher principle and stronger force of self-denial than most ; but he was also a man of warmer feeling than most, and his love had never been weakened by being divided and frittered away in such innumerable amours as had swayed in their turn the fancies of

Guilderoy. All the grave and absorbing claims upon his life from his party and his country could not prevent his unspoken attachment to his cousin's wife growing daily and hourly in influence on him. But he had strength to keep it untold, for he felt that any expression of it would destroy the serenity of trust with which she looked to him in all things, and would alarm her, dismay her, and leave her utterly alone.

He was her only friend ; for all others whom she knew had fallen from her. Her life was dreary and dangerous as it was. With none to whom she could show her aching heart, it would become to her, he knew, a solitude beyond the strength of any woman so young to endure. She herself had that oblivion of possible calumny and of the imputation of low motives which is at once the strength and the feebleness of noble natures, and leaves them exposed to the false constructions of those who, unheeded by them, observe them with malevolence and coarseness ; such malevolence and such coarseness as are always the foundations of the superficial judgments of society. She did not think for a moment of any possible misconstruction of that

kindly and honest affection which Aubrey had shown her ever since he had first met her in the little Watteau cabinet at Guilderoy House the day after her first drawing-room. He had been always there to serve her in any difficulty, to counsel her in any distress; it was natural that he should come to her now in her solitude.

It seemed to her strange that he came so little; it seemed even unkind and unjust. She accused him in her thoughts of leaning to his cousin's side, of being so swayed by family considerations of pride and sympathy of kindred that he palliated and excused his cousin's conduct to an extent which was injustice to herself. Woman-like, she required in her friend unlimited approval and undivided sentiment; she wanted to hear him tell her that she had done wholly right, was wholly to be pitied and esteemed. The slightest reservation in sympathy struck on her aching heart as with the cold severity of censure.

It made him afraid for her sake to assume any prominence in her affairs or to take that part on her behalf with his cousin which it would have been his natural impulse to take. Neither Guilderoy nor the world would ever

have credited him with the unselfish feelings which would have been his only motive power. He saw no way in which he could assist without more greatly injuring her. He knew, too, that it was likely enough they would associate his own name with the causes of her voluntary retirement; and he was conscious that every step he took, and every word he spoke in her protection or defence, would only create more strongly the impression that he in some way or another controlled her destinies.

Nor did he disguise from her that all his family blamed her; even his sister blamed her. They were intolerant of a publicity and eccentricity which they could not conceal from society, and of which with more or less undisguised inquisitiveness the world around them wearied them incessantly for the explanation. They felt all the impatience of a proud and sensitive race at the needless wonder and conjecture which were aroused by her retirement to her father's cottage. It had caused a public scandal where the world need have known nothing of the differences between herself and her husband.

True, she herself knew that Guilderoy has left her never to return to her, and that such total

separation from her had been the price put by her rival on her re-acceptance of his vows ; but they did not know this, and, had they known it, would have thought it a mere delirium on his part which would pass away with time and with indulgence. They would have censured him strongly, but they would not have deemed her justified by his conduct in taking such a course as gave her name to the whole world to tear in pieces in the excitement of its curiosity and baffled interrogation. The view which Hilda Sunbury took of her action was in the main the view of all those powerful families with which Guilderoy was connected, whether closely or distantly, by blood or alliance. They defended him because he belonged to them ; and they visited her with their displeasure because they thought, as his sister did, that she had been grossly at fault throughout, that she had never known how to obtain any influence over him, and that, having confirmed his faults by over-leniency to them in the first years of their marriage, she had now injured him by severity and severance when both were ill-timed and misunderstood.

Though often when she was alone the

conscience of Hilda Sunbury smote her, remembering the last words which she had heard John Vernon speak to her, yet in society she did not hesitate to exculpate her brother at his wife's cost. She did not scruple to hint, with many adroit phrases, at incompatibility of temper, want of sympathy, coldness of feeling, which excused if they did not justify Guilderoy's indifference.

'I say nothing ; I blame no one,' she replied continually to her questioners ; but there was a tone in the words which implied a more injurious censure than any direct accusation would have done.

And when Aubrey, angered and in earnest, told something of the truth, and took up the defence of his cousin's wife, society listened to him with apparent deference because he was a great person in more ways than one and a leader of opinion, both social and political ; but, in his absence, smiled and said that he had always been her friend, always been conspicuously attendant on her from the earliest days of her appearance in the world. Without the voices of the women of his House raised on her behalf, he could

do but little in her service ; and they, at their friendliest, thought of her as the Duchess of Longleat did, who said one day to him :

‘ If she would come and stay with me, if she would hold her own at Ladysrood, if she would lead any natural life so that the world need not talk, I would support her in every way. But as long as she buries herself in this ridiculous isolation, as long as she virtually blames herself by her acceptance of an utterly invidious position, I can do nothing for her even if I wished. You say that Guilderoy leaves her ; it may be so ; but to all appearance it is she who leaves him. You say that she has voluntarily given up her place in his life and all her rights ; I do not doubt you, but there is certainly every appearance that it is he who has refused them to her for some just cause : I say just because, were it unjust, she would most certainly protest. I have always been attached to her ; first because she pleased you, and then because she pleased me myself ; but she has placed herself in an absurdly false position, even accepting your account of the causes which have led to it, and I do not see what any one can possibly do to sustain her in it.’

‘I thought you more generous and less conventional,’ said Aubrey, angered deeply, ‘and I think that when I give you my word that her conduct has not only been blameless but admirable, you might trust me enough to believe in my assurance.’

‘My dear, I do not doubt that you give it in perfect good faith,’ said his sister. ‘Who could doubt your good faith who knows you? But you have always been infatuated about her—pardon me the word—and I confess that I think your chivalry is doing her, in her present position, infinitely more harm than good. If she will come and stay with me I will receive her. What more can I say? I have always been greatly her friend. But so long as she condemns herself in society’s opinion by living alone in a little cottage where she is only visible to you, no one can be of any solid service to her. You say that Evelyn is living openly with the Duchess Sorìa. It may be so. But the world does not believe it, because the Duchess Sorìa is a woman wise enough always to please and pamper the world; and even if it be ever generally known, every one will declare that Lady Guilderoy could have only

one or two courses open to her—either to carry her case to the tribunals, which is what vulgar women do, or else to go on her usual routine as if she saw nothing and heard nothing, which is what women who are gentlewomen do all their lives long.’

‘It is what she is doing.’

‘No ; what she is doing is a romantic, head-strong, idiotic thing with which you have great sympathy, but with which no one else living will ever have the slightest patience. She is drawing the whole world’s attention down upon her, and no woman can ever do that without being condemned by it. When the season comes, and she is not in her house in town, not in her place at Court, not in her position in society, not in her home of Ladysrood, and every one knows that she is living alone in the cottage her father died in, what do you suppose that society in general will say ?’

‘If it can ever say the truth by any miracle, it will say that she is so living because she is too sensitive and too proud to accept the maintenance of a man who is unfaithful to her without secrecy or excuse.’

‘No ; the world will say nothing of the

sort, for it does not believe in miracles. It will take the side which is popular; it always takes the side which is popular, and you know it does; it will exonerate Guilderoy, because it has never liked her; and, being essentially vulgar, which all society is in our day, it will utterly refuse to credit that any woman voluntarily surrenders all the material pleasures of a great income and a great position. When all our maidens are brought up only to think life worth living if they can sell themselves for those, who will be likely to hear with patience that Gladys alone of her sex despises them? You know, as well as I do, that though you proclaimed it in Westminster Hall with sound of trumpets, you would not find any living creature to believe you.'

'I supposed that *you* would believe me,' said Aubrey with great anger and some emotion.

Ermyntrude Longleat looked at him with tenderness and anxiety.

'I have not said that I do not, my dearest. But I know her intimately, and I know that her education has given her that unworldliness and unwisdom which always appear either a crime or a lunacy to the world at large. I

believe her motives to be what you say ; but I think the act they have resulted in is deplorable. It must make the breach between her and Guilderoy irrevocable. You seem to me to remember that too little. You forget that after all we are his relatives, not hers ; and in my opinion her first obligation was to him, not to her own pride. You would see this as I see it if your feelings were not biassed by strong personal interest in her which blinds you to common facts. Forgive me, dear, if I have said too much.'

'It is precisely because we are his relatives, not hers, that common justice and common honour call on us to defend her against him,' said Aubrey, passing over her latter words. 'Guilderoy requires neither pity nor support ; he does what he pleases ; he would always do what he pleased if the whole world were burning. He leaves his wife much as he would any *cocotte*. He offers a different price, it is true. He has told his lawyers to give her half his income. But the feeling which governs him is the same as if he were paying off a woman he wanted no more. He deems himself *quitte par la bourse*.'

‘ And she refuses? ’

‘ She refuses. She will live on the little her father left her. I confess I am amazed that such a choice in so young a woman does not move you to admiration.’

‘ I cannot admire what is making the whole of society talk ill of a person who is related to me.’

‘ You speak as if he were blameless.’

‘ No; but if every woman in our world made such an *esclandre* as she, society would be at an end.’

‘ She has made none. She has simply withdrawn herself to the life that she led before marriage.’

‘ And, pray, what is that but a public separation? ’

‘ It is a separation certainly, but not a public one. It would be utterly ignoble if, because we are closely connected with him, we upheld him against a wholly innocent woman. She may not have acted judiciously, but she has most certainly acted as only a wholly innocent woman would act; and she is as entirely sacrificed to him as if he had killed her in the flesh as he has in the spirit.’

His sister listened to him with sorrow and apprehension.

‘I hope to heaven you will not be sacrificed to her in turn!’ she thought, but she forebore to say it.

Aubrey was disappointed and angered at her want of sympathy, and took his leave of her, failing for the first time in their lives to influence her by his opinions and his desires.

Knowing the world profoundly as he did, he divined all that the world was saying of Gladys, not in his hearing indeed, nor in that of any member of his family, but nevertheless saying unsparingly, inevitably, with all its inexhaustible powers of exaggeration and invention. Who beside himself and the few who knew her intimately would believe in the story as she told it, in the motives as she gave them?

When her position was a target for the arrows of slander, how could she escape them? Who would believe in the pride and indignation of a character, still so childlike in its impulses and so unworldly in its estimates, that it could avenge its wrongs by stripping itself of every material advantage and every pleasure and pomp of life?

Her choice was one of those things which the world will to the day of judgment utterly refuse to credit, because, breaking all its canons and ignoring all its estimates, they afford to it no kind of common ground on which their motives can be judged.

Aubrey knew that; and he knew that it would be as likely a task to persuade geese hissing on a common of the beauty of a sunrise as to induce the mass of society to give credence to the reasons which had led her to return to the house at Christslea.

It was an exaggerated sentiment, and when some idea of what she had done was bruited about in society it was called morbid and mad by the few who did not go still farther and say that she had been forced to do it by her husband on the discovery of her attachment to his cousin. It was an unwise act; unwise with that mingling of sublimity and folly which characterises most acts of any strong feeling. She seemed by it to give colour and ground to the conjectures raised against her; it was an error which none but a very young and a very proud woman would have made.

The money which her father had inherited,

and which had come in due course to her, Guilderoy had immediately secured to her in such a manner that it was her own as absolutely as if she had never married. Under her marriage settlements her father had been her only trustee ; and his sudden death had left her sole mistress of her actions. Vernon had never felt the least anxiety as to her safety in her husband's hands with regard to all material welfare. Guilderoy was at all times not only generous but scrupulous in the observance of all obligations of that kind, and had never had the slightest disorder in his personal affairs. What he had once promised in the little study at Christslea on this point he had thoroughly and blamelessly fulfilled. She was, therefore, so placed now that no one except himself could have any legal title to interfere in her actions, and he did not seek to interfere.

It angered him deeply, it oppressed and humiliated him, to know that his wife was living on her own resources in a little cottage ten miles off his own country house. He was well aware of how the whole world of their acquaintances would speak of so strange a thing, and of how many and how strained would be the

constructions placed upon it. But he did not endeavour to prevent it. He felt that he had wronged her too much to have any mortal right to dictate to her. It seemed to him that only a cur could exercise the power given him by the law when he had voluntarily declined the power given him by the affections. To attempt to dictate to his wife when he had abandoned her would have appeared to him the very basest depth of low breeding.

Her choice embarrassed and pained him ; it made him feel forsworn in all the promises which he had given to provide for her material welfare ; it rendered the memory of John Vernon doubly reproachful to him. He knew that it must emphasise and darken his own acts in the sight of his relatives and his society in general. To a man like him, who was always careful to atone for moral unkindness to women by great care for their material welfare, and who looked on them as beautiful and delicate animals which needed luxury and shelter as racers did, it was intensely distressing to think that the woman whom he had made the bearer of his name should be living in a manner which to him seemed scarcely above penury.

His pride was hurt by it; both his pride of place and that higher kind of pride which goes with all the sentiments of a gentleman. He never dreamed that the world would blame her, as it did do, instead of himself, and he felt that he must appear in its sight a brute who not only wronged but defrauded his wife. He was very far from imagining that the capriciousness of society would transfer all its blame from him to her. Knowing the world as he did, such inversion of it never occurred to him as possible.

But Gladys had never had the favour of her world. All her courtesies, her generousities, her many thoughtful and tender-hearted acts had failed to atone for the unconscious hauteur of her manner and the tacit rebuke which her silence was to the amusements around her. She had had at all times as her enemies the many women who had loved and had lost Guilderoy, and their voices in the earliest days of her début had set the current of feeling against her.

Rumour excused his weaknesses and distorted her failings. The Duchess Sorìa was beloved and followed by the great world. It

had never condemned, it would always be very slow to condemn, her. It would unquestionably hesitate to see anything harmful in any of her friendships; and it would as certainly refuse to believe that any woman of years so youthful as those of Gladys would voluntarily and innocently retire into the poverty of a rural and obscure life.

The world has its own reasons for believing and for disbelieving; the facts of any case do not enter into these, nor in any way affect them. There are those who can do no wrong in its sight, and these have a charter of infallibility; there are others who can do nothing to its taste, and these are condemned even before they act.

Then not a few also were envious of what was considered her monopoly of such a man as Aubrey. His great position and reputation made him the desire and the despair of many; and when it was seen how much time he could find to give to his cousin's young wife, though for no other dalliance of the sort had he leisure, there had never been wanting those who were ready to suggest that his attentions to Lady Guilderoy had as their ultimate object

something much less innocent than the mere pleasantness of family regard.

The proud and the delicate disdain the favour of the world, but they pay heavily for their disdain. The favour of the world makes us walk on the sunny side of the street, gives us a south aspect to our house of life, sweeps the dust and the mud from the paths we tread, and when we set sail from any port sends us favouring winds and smiling seas. She had never had that pliability and popularity which gives a woman in a difficult position the support of a thousand friends who make common cause with her. That rare high-breeding and that delicate hauteur which had marked her actions and her manner in the world had made her many enemies. There were few other women in European society who would not be gratified to think that proud young head was humbled. He could hear, as though he were present at them, the million and one different conversations in which the fact of her separation from her husband would be discussed, accounted for, embroidered on, censured, and ridiculed, all by turns.

No one wrote to her or came to her except her one friend.

The world will always let any one fall out of its favour who chooses to do so. She had made none of those intimacies with women which give a woman sympathy and support. She had been disdainful of the society of her own sex; to her mind, used to communion with such intelligences as her father's and Aubrey's, feminine conversation and confidences seemed trivial and frivolous. Men who had admired her despite her coldness, and would gladly have atoned to her for her husband's neglect had she given them the slightest sign of permission, were afraid to seek her out in her solitude because of the generally credited report that Aubrey was primarily responsible for her selection of it. He was not a man with whom other men cared to meddle. The very coldness and indifference to women of his life hitherto made it generally supposed that his dedication of himself to his cousin's wife argued some deep mutual attraction which would not brook any interference.

It was altogether in vain that he in real truth saw her seldom, was careful to do nothing

which could give grounds for calumny, and made his visits to her of brief duration. The world only saw in such scrupulous care the secrecy and the consciousness of a concealed intrigue which his public career made it necessary to conduct with the most delicate observance of appearances. 'It is nothing new; he was always in love with her,' said men and women both; and it seemed to them all as clear as daylight that it was the origin of Guilderoy's abandonment of her. He had discovered what he did not choose to condone, no doubt, and so had exiled her to her father's house in preference to seeking any more public remedy. He and Aubrey were near relatives. Their families were proud. Of course the matter had been arranged thus for the sake of peace and of the avoidance of the country's disapprobation; the attitude of Lady Sunbury and her ominous silence made them certain that this was the truth of the whole position. They blamed Aubrey more than they blamed Guilderoy.

The latter had always been frankly a man of pleasure, *un homme léger*; he had never assumed any serious attitude before the nation.

But Aubrey was a politician of distinction and of immense influence ; that he should cause any scandal of the sort seemed an offence against the country itself ; a kind of immorality which was almost a treachery to it. ‘ And his cousin’s wife, too ! ’ they cried, ‘ and a woman so young ! ’ All the great ladies who had had histories in their own lives, and all the fashionable *femmes tarées* who kept their footing with difficulty in society, were so shocked that they could not bring themselves to speak of it. And a Scotch waiting-woman who had taken service with a Scotch marchioness of very strict religious opinions sighed and hinted that she had left Lady Guilderoy’s service because even at that time Lord Aubrey had been more intimate in his cousin’s house than her principles had permitted her to countenance. ‘ I am a poor woman who work for my bread, my lady,’ said the good creature, ‘ and I have five small children dependent on my earnings ; but let me suffer what I might, I could never consent to prosper by taking the wages of sin.’

‘ Your feelings and your scruples do you very great honour,’ said her employer, who

was of a different political party to that of which Aubrey was a leader.

And little by little the impression grew into a certainty with the world that Guilderoy, however blamable, had had much cause to blame others, and to leave the country.

CHAPTER LI.

THE delicately good taste of Beatrice Sorìa had made it easy for the high society of Europe to see nothing, if it chose to see nothing, blamable in the renewed intimacy between her and Guilderoy. Theirs was one of those positions, they are not rare, in which the popularity or unpopularity of the persons concerned wholly determines the amount of indulgence or of censure which they shall receive from others. Tact goes for much in this, and distinction for much. The great lady does unblamed what the woman of yesterday would be stoned for attempting. There is a sublime nonchalance and a calm superiority to calumny which repel it utterly, much more effectually than any mere virtue. The world but asks from us external observances ; if we do not give these, we are such fools that we merit that sentence of banishment from it which is as terrible as the fiat of exile

to Ovid. Beatrice Sorìa had always been heedful to give those observances, not from want of courage, for she had great courage, but from good breeding. It seemed to her vulgar to put out your passions in the street, as the poor hang their soiled linen. It is enough for you to know your own happiness ; you do not want the crowd to see the rose hung above your portal.

She had made it her condition that he should now leave his wife utterly for her sake, because it seemed to her that nothing less than that could atone to her for his abandonment of herself, could reconcile her to her own lost dignity, or ensure her against a merely partial offering of his life such as would have seemed to her at once an insolence and a humiliation. ‘I alone, or nothing!’ she had said, as every woman says it, although so few have power to enforce it. It had been the only means by which she had been able to test the sincerity of his regret and the loyalty of his return.

True, she had sacrificed to it an innocent woman ; but it was only natural that the fullness of her own triumph had weighed more

with her than any memory of her rival's misery. Like all great conquerors, she felt that it was not for her to heed or to pause for the fallen.

She was in no way a cruel woman, but she felt the contempt felt by all women who have great dominion over men for those who cannot attain equal power over them.

‘She has loveliness, and youth, and many rare qualities of both heart and mind, and yet she can only sigh and suffer because he is faithless!’ she had often thought with wondering disdain of Gladys as she had studied her in society.

She allowed nothing in their apparent intercourse which could give rise to any scandal, except such as must be inevitably caused by his continued residence in Italy. She made him live in his own houses, visit her with precaution, and never publicly presume upon his relations to her. It was her wisdom as well as her good taste which influenced her. She knew the truth that

Dulci ferimur : succo renovamur amaro ;

and she did not allow their intimacy to be degraded into a too facile habit which would

inevitably have become with time careless and over-sure.

She knew his nature and the temperament of men too well to allow him that too constant access to happiness which soon results in making such happiness insipid and unenjoyed. All the faults which had cost her so dear in her first association with him she avoided now ; and even still at times he was so doubtful of his influence over her, despite all the proofs he had of it, that he asked himself uneasily whether his surrender to her had not been demanded by her rather through pride than love. It was the uncertainty, the stimulant, the mortification, which were needful to sustain at its strength the passion of a man whose conquests had been as easy as his caprices, and had been short-lived.

‘ Even now I do not believe that you love me as you used to do ! ’ he said to her more than once.

She smiled. ‘ What is love ? ’ she said dreamily. ‘ Sometimes I think it is the most absurd and the basest feeling of our lives ; and sometimes I think it is the only spark of immortality which we ever have in us.’

‘It seems to me immortal when I look on you,’ he answered ; and he was sincere in what he said.

All these months had passed with him in a happiness which had been more nearly the ideal happiness of his early dreams than any he had ever known. His re-conquest of her glorious physical beauty and the potent and subtle charm of her intelligence exercised a sway over him which was deeper and more enduring than the first passion which she had excited in him. The amorous spell which lies in the climate of the country which had always been the land of his preference, and the easy languor of life in it, added to the spell of her influences upon him. He marvelled how ever he could have been mad enough to leave her ; he wondered how he had passed years of his existence without her. Either warned by her previous loss of him, or calmed by the greatness and completeness of her triumph, or perchance bringing now into her relations with him as much of wisdom as she had once brought of passion, she gave him all the loveliness of love without its exactions and its violence. She bent all the varied resources of

her mind, which were infinite, and all the powers of her seductions, which were endless, to prove to him all that he had missed in missing her, all which no other woman on earth could give to him ; and she succeeded. She succeeded, now that it was a matter with her rather of supremacy, and pride, and triumph, than of love, where she had failed when it had been to her a thing of life and of death, on which all her soul had been cast. Passion serves women ill : it makes their eyes blind, their steps rash, their acts unwise ; and unselfishness in love serves them still worse. Desire of dominion, on the contrary, is their most safe and subtle servant, placing illimitable power in their hands, and leaving their sight clear to use it in their own interest as they will.

Beatrice Sorìà had been a better woman when he had thought her a worse one, a tenderer woman when he had thought her a more violent one ; her heart still beat for him, but no more with the rash, ardent, delirious warmth of earlier days. Dominant over her impulses of revived passion was a colder and more egotistic intent to make him and to keep him once more wholly hers.

In the autumn of the year, Guilderoy was for a while in Venice, nominally living at his own palazzino there, whilst she was at one of the villas on the Brenta, which she had inherited as part of her mother's dower ; one of those marvels of art and architecture which stand amidst the gladiolus-filled marshes and the green mulberry-shaded pastures of the Veneto, so little known, so rarely visited, but as much memorials of the greatness and luxury of the Venetian patricians as are the streets of the city herself. In early autumn, when the rose and white pomea is in flower in all the hedges, and the last aftermath is mown in the meadows, and the barges come down the river laden with purple and yellow grapes, and the marvellous sunsets burn over the wide-spreading waters, and the little grey owls flit under the poplar shadows, these villas on the Brenta form as lovely a retreat as the world can offer ; and the gaiety and the pageantry of Goldoni and of Carpaccio seem to be renewed, and the lovely ladies and the gay gallants of Rosalba and of Longhi seem to live again in them.

For the most part they are, unhappily,

abandoned to neglect, decay, and silence ; but in hers the animation, the brilliancy, and the courtliness which her society brought thither were worthy of the traditions of Catarina Corner, the adored and adorable, who once had held her court there.

Guilderoy was little in the city, much at the villa, and the days were long and light and sensuous and soft as the music of Gretry, which had used to echo over those waters and down those marble colonnades in the days of Madama Cattina.

One of the most potent seductions of Beatrice Sorìa lay in the forms of life with which she surrounded herself. The atmosphere in which a woman lives stimulates, or kills, love for her as much as does her person or her mind. Even one who is not beautiful derives a certain reflection of beauty from beautiful surroundings ; and where she has ever about her pleasure, grace, and gaiety, she will have in them strong auxiliaries to charm and retain those whom she desires to please. The varied and brilliant existence which she created by her magnificent modes of living, and her unusual wit, made her houses wholly unlike any other.

‘ You alone know how to live ! ’ some one said to her once ; and she thought sadly, ‘ Yes ; I know how to live ; it is much, no doubt. But how to exorcise that spirit of dissatisfaction which dulls all sooner or later would be more—how—how ? It has perplexed and baffled every voluptuary and every artist since the world began ! ’ She interrogated in vain the shades of the great pleasure-seekers and the glad lovers who had passed down those marble staircases and under those canopies of trellised vine before her, in the days that were dead,

Sulle rive d’Adria bella.

Men had always been her playthings ; she had done whatever she had chosen with them ; but she always felt for them that indolent, indulgent, and yet at times impatient derision with which a woman of high intelligence and profound passions is apt to regard both her lovers and her friends.

And in her, now, besides this, was a vague, slight, very vague, very slight, sense of disappointment.

Was it because she failed to feel those intensities of emotion which she had felt before ?

Was it because no one summer is like another? Was it because the mind and nature change with time, and what is delightful and exquisite in one season cannot wholly content them in another? Or was it because the passions are such subtle, self-willed, and mysterious agents of our being that they resist the appeal to them to build in last year's nests? She could not tell; all the penetration and intuition of her intelligence and experience did not suffice to explain to her why this vague, faint sense of disappointment followed on the renewal of her romance.

It was no fault of his.

He was the most devoted and the most tender of lovers. It was perhaps that her memory and her imagination had expected more than it was humanly possible for any love to give from their reunion; or perhaps she unconsciously missed the stimulant of that desire to regain his affections which had moved all her strongest feelings since his marriage. She had nothing more left to wish for; in the full, rich, and pampered life of Beatrice Sorìa that fact was almost a loss in itself. She felt for him tenderly and with warmth indeed;

but it was not the same feeling as had subjugated all her soul and her senses in the first days of its ascendancy.

‘Perhaps I grow old, and so indifferent,’ she thought; but then she looked in her mirror and smiled, and knew that it was not that.

Was it then the inevitable reaction of expectations too great for finite human passions to fulfil them? Was it that the lost music had seemed so sweet in its remembrance that no strain of it, heard now, could ever seem to equal it in melody? ‘I loved him better when he was not mine,’ she thought sometimes with the saddest consciousness which can ever visit love. Alas! it is not an unfrequent visitant.

Coming down the Grand Canal one early forenoon, when the pressure of gondolas there was greater than usual owing to some Church festival, his own was jostled between two others and had to pause in its outward voyage while the rival rowers exchanged the usual maledictions with uplifted oars and infinite variety of florid oaths. He heard his own name spoken by one of two men who were sketching in a gondola tied to one of the piles before a

water-gate. They were making drawings of all that is left of the Falier palace, and of its little garden court and wooden wicket; they were painters well known in the artistic world of London, and they recognised him as he passed.

‘Where is his wife, do you know?’ said one of them. ‘She was a lovely creature. You remember Leighton’s portrait of her three years ago.’

‘She is always living alone in a little house on the sea-coast, I believe,’ replied the other.

‘Separated, then?’

‘Yes, virtually. Lord Aubrey consoles her, I believe. Some people say that he always did.’

‘Aubrey? The Minister?’

‘The man who was Minister in the last Administration, yes. There is only one. He is this man’s cousin.’

‘The relationship gave him opportunities, I suppose?’

The other artist laughed; and they both went on with their drawing of the little acacia-tree by the green gate of the court of the Falieri.

Guilderoy felt a strange emotion as his

gondola, extricated, passed on its way towards the Lido. There was no truth, he knew, in this foolish gossiping ; and yet it wounded, offended, and irritated him.

As the vessel passed outward on its way towards the lagoon he, lying back on his black cushions, could not shake off the rough unpleasant impression of the words which he had overheard. Was this how they were talking of him in England? Such a possibility had never come before his thoughts before.

He had actually and morally set his wife as free as though his death had released her from him. He did not believe that Aubrey had as yet become her lover, but he suddenly realised that it was a possibility which was more than possible. It did not find him indifferent. It touched that sensitive nerve in him which men call honour for want of a clearer name for it, though it is in truth rather personal pride and love of dignity than honour.

It suddenly awakened the image of Gladys from that dim forgotten past into which it had retreated, and restored her to a place, not in his heart indeed, but in his memories and in his susceptibilities.

She had seemed to him scarcely more than a shade as she had last appeared before him in the ghastly and pallid hues of the dreamlike chambers of his Neapolitan palace, an avenging shape arisen to reproach him and to curse him ; but now she became more than this ; he realised that she was a living woman of breathing life and motion, who had it in her power, if she chose, to return him the harm that he had done to her by a vengeance which would touch him to the quick and humble him in the eyes of all men.

And why should she not do it ? If she did, could he honestly blame her ?

He knew he could not.

Why should he demand from a young and lonely woman a force of self-control of which his own strength and manhood had been incapable ? The consciousness oppressed and haunted him with a vague dread. He remembered the warning Aubrey had given him, *Nil Helena peccat*. Had his cousin meant to give him in it a personal and not a general advertisement of impending possible ill ? Had Aubrey, with his habitual candour, meant to say to him,

What you do not care to guard I shall consider

that I am at liberty to approach as I may choose.' He knew the loyalty and frankness of his cousin's character; it would, he knew, be very like him that on the eve of a prohibited attachment he should frankly endeavour to warn and place on his defence the man whose honour would be involved.

It was a beautiful afternoon as his boatmen took him, a few hours later, up the Brenta water, through the sparkling sunshine. The leaves were yellow on the poplars, and the trees looked made of gold. The wide green meadows were bathed in light. The thatch-roofs of the cottages looked like the brown nests of big birds amongst the ever-flowering foliage. Huge barges and flat-bottomed boats, with painted sails leaning motionless on the lazy air, passed him laden with grapes and gourds, amber pears and rosy-cheeked apples. The far hills were sweet and fair with all the colours of the opal and the amethyst in them. But the beauty of the scene was lost on him.

He was thinking ever of the *Nil Helena peccat*.

When he reached the water-stairs of the villa, with steps of marble shelving down into

the bulrushes and yellowing water-lily leaves, the day had grown dark. It was the hour of reunion in the great central hall, with columns and sculptures of Sansovino and a domed ceiling, where frescoes of Tiepolo's were lost in the immense height of the vault. Its owner was accustomed to gather her guests about her there before dinner in the autumn evenings, when the great olive and oak logs burning on the enormous hearth under its porphyry caryatides had a welcome warmth as the cold vapours of night succeeded to the warm sunshine of the passed day.

He felt out of mood for that gay circle ; for once, when he had changed his clothes and joined it, the brilliant gathering, where the men had the wit of Carlo Gozzi and the women the beauty of Teresa Venier, jarred upon him in its brilliancy and mirth.

‘ You have taken a chill on the water,’ some one said to him ; he answered absently, ‘ No—yes—perhaps.’

Much later in the evening Beatrice Soria herself noticed his preoccupation.

‘ You have heard something which displeases you of your wife,’ she mused, for her quick

intuitions let her read the souls of men, even in their secrecies, like open books.

She had taken means to inform herself of the manner in which Gladys had chosen to live, though her name had never once been mentioned between them.

To Beatrice Sorìa she was a woman beaten, forsaken, indifferent, insignificant; she pitied her and never spoke of her. But, she mused, it was so like a man because he had deserted her to think of her, even to think of her regretfully! Men were such children; such weak, wayward, fearful children, as she had said once on the banks of the Thames to Aubrey: always wanting that which they have not, always regretting their own actions when it is too late to efface them, always putting the blame upon fate which is due to their own folly, caprice, or instability!

The excuse is always 'The woman tempted me and I did eat' in the wilderness of the world as in the Garden of Eden.

'You are ill at ease and out of spirits,' she said as she passed him. 'Do not look so; people will say that I tyrannise over you; nothing is more absurd than that.'

‘I cannot tutor my looks,’ he answered with impatience. ‘Perhaps I am not well. I do not know.’

They were unobserved for a moment, others were dancing. He looked at her with an imploring gaze.

‘You do love me?’ he added. ‘Tell me again.’

‘What a child you are!’ she said with a smile. ‘What is the use of saying what is proved?’

‘But is it proved?’

‘What can you possibly mean?’

‘I mean, in this gorgeous life of yours, flattered, amused, and adored as you are, what room is there for any great or exclusive feeling?’

‘It seems to me, my friend, that it is very late for that doubt to come to you?’

‘Perhaps I am jealous. You have so many who love you, and you are too indulgent with them.’

‘Do not become Othello because we are in the Veneto. It will not suit you in any way. Your love has always been *galanterie*.’

‘Not always.’

‘Yes, always, I think, at heart.’

‘That is cruelly unjust! What greater evidence——’

Coldness and anger came into her eyes.

‘Do not remind me of your sacrifices. It is very bad taste.’

‘Sacrifices! Who spoke of sacrifices? I simply meant, what more could any man do than I have done?’

‘I do not know, my dear, that it was so very much that you did. You were tired of your English life; what we are tired of, it does not cost much to renounce, and some people do say that it was rather your wife who renounced you, than you your wife.’

‘That is utterly untrue!’

‘It may be,’ said Beatrice Sorìà with a gesture of entire indifference. ‘I suppose you quarrelled. We will not quarrel, my dear; it is the sorriest and the meanest grave that love can ever find.’

She passed her hand lightly over his hair as she spoke, with something which was compassionate and mournful in the lingering caress.

‘Now go and join those dancers and look happy. I cannot have my people think I make

you otherwise than happy. In truth, you will never be happy very long, for you are life's spoilt child.'

He kissed with passionate fervour the whiteness of her arm as it was near his lips.

'You have made me as happy as a god this whole long year!'

'Then it should seem a very short year to you!' she said with her slow sweet smile, and left him to join her guests.

His eyes followed her with worship. Alone for her had he ever approached that strength and constancy of passion which is the love of the poets. It was foreign to his temperament, and ill akin to all his inconstant habits, but it had been illumined in him for her. A vague and painful sense perpetually haunted him that though he again possessed her he did not again possess her soul, that though he had renewed his position towards her, he was powerless to regain over her that vital ascendancy which he had once owned and had wantonly thrown away; and this doubt increased the influence she had upon him by the perpetual consciousness which he felt of uncertainty and inequality.

When he had had power to make her

absolute wretchedness, to be her arbiter of fate, to cause her tortures by a day's absence, by a month's silence, by a slighting word or by a careless homage taken elsewhere, he had been indifferent to his power and often also too indifferent to her pain. But now their positions were reversed; he did not feel for an instant that he was vitally necessary to her; he did feel that she was life and death to him and mistress in the uttermost sense of all his fate.

CHAPTER LII.

A FEW days later Guilderoy sent to one of his men of business to come to Venice. There was an intricate question pending in England affecting some leases on one of his estates which afforded reason enough to summon his land-agent to a personal conference. When the matter had been discussed in its financial and legal aspects, he inquired as carelessly as he could :

‘ And what of Lady Guilderoy? Is she well? Is she always living in the house her father had at Christslea?’

His agent answered in the affirmative, feeling on his own part considerable embarrassment, for this separation into which the law did not enter, this unexplained and unregulated severance, was little understood by any of his people.

‘ And does she keep herself wholly with-

drawn from the world?' he added. 'Does she see no one? I regret it if it is so; she is too young for such solitude.'

'She sees no one,' said the man of business, more and more in doubt as to what answers he should make. 'At least Lord Aubrey comes sometimes, as no doubt your lordship knows.'

Guilderoy's face flushed. 'Yes, I have asked him to do so,' he said quickly.

It was a falsehood, but it was an instinctive one to save her from suspicion.

He inquired no more.

The agent returned home with a doubt which had not before visited him that Lady Guilderoy was not so wholly innocent as she looked.

'After all,' thought the man, 'she keeps him out of England, so it is she who must be to blame, there can be no doubt of that.'

Guilderoy had told Aubrey himself that it was a pity that he had not married her, and he had thought so honestly. They would have been perfectly sympathetic one to another. Yet the knowledge that these sympathies which were between them had now full leisure and free

scope to be developed and indulged in any way they chose, in the absolute loneliness of Christslea, was detestable to him. After all, he thought, he could not refuse her the liberty which he had himself taken. It would have seemed to him mean and unworthy to enjoy a freedom for himself which he did not accord to her. He had the large morality, or immorality, of a man of the world; if she could console herself in any way for the disorder and desolation which he had brought into her life, he would be a brute to grudge it to her. So he reasoned.

He had put her out of his own existence; he could not complain if she made a separate life for herself. And yet the idea of his cousin alone with her in those little quiet rooms of Christslea was disagreeable to him. She had said that she would always respect the honour of his name, but those were only words, though they might have been words sincerely meant when they were spoken. He knew that the heart of any woman once seriously involved will force her to abandon her strongest principles as the warmth of summer forces the willow and the sycamore to drop their spring-

time catkins. And he thought of her more than he had ever done before.

She had grown very vague to him. His memory had but seldom reverted to her. He possessed the happy faculty of being able to dismiss from his mind what he did not wish to think of; and the coldness, the harshness, and the scorn with which she had spoken to him in their last interview had hardened his heart utterly against her. But since the words of his man of business, few and trite though they were, the manner of her life came before him more painfully, more positively. The little house at Christslea and the recollection of John Vernon came to his recollection with painful clearness. He remembered the first day that he had gone thither, and been welcomed with such frank cordiality and simplicity. He had repaid the welcome ill; he knew it, and, being by nature generous, the sense of his own lack of generosity oppressed him with a sense of error which all the moralists on earth would never have succeeded in bringing home to him.

As he walked in the glad sunshine by the banks of the Brenta, he thought of Christslea as he knew that it must be then; bleak, cold, grey,

cheerless, with dull angry waters, and high winds blowing through black, leafless trees, and lonely moorlands shrouded in icy mists. Winter on that coast had always been to him an unendurable and hateful thing ; and yet she was living through it by deliberate choice, uncompanied, unfriended, and alone. Nay—not always alone. She had Aubrey. Aubrey was a man of scrupulous honour he knew ; but he also knew that there are hours in all the lives of those who love in which resistance and strength sleep like the tired Samson in the noon siesta. He knew, too, that his own conduct had given him no title to complain of whatever advantage any other man might take of his absence.

Aubrey was there, sometimes at least, in such familiar intercourse as solitude in the country perforce creates. The idea was not welcome to him. There had been occasionally in him a vague impatience of the high esteem in which she held his cousin, and the comparison which she had openly drawn more than once between their manner of life. Aubrey had been indifferent to women, but women had never been indifferent to him ; his person, his intellect, and his fame were all such as might

well captivate a poetic and serious woman such as Gladys was, especially if united to a romantic and chivalrous devotion, aided by the auxiliaries of solitude and misfortune.

Guilderoy, who was so profoundly versed in the contradictions and intricacies of the feminine temperament, knew that there is no moment at which it is so susceptible to attachment as that in which it is bruised and bleeding from the offences and the wounds of desertion.

Well, if it were so, he told himself, he had no right to object to it, or to censure her; he had no possible title to ask her to lead a joyless, passionless existence in the full flower of her youth and her beauty. He had taken his own freedom, his own happiness as he conceived it to be; he had no right whatsoever to deny any possible compensation to her. And yet his pride was hurt at the possibility, though his affections were wholly indifferent to it.

The subject occupied his thoughts when he was alone to an extent which surprised himself; and rendered him even at times preoccupied when in society or even when alone with the woman he loved.

The letters of his sister had been so in-

cessant and so monotonous in their perpetual invective and reproach that he had wholly ceased to reply to them, and of late had long let them lie unopened. Her reproaches had always incensed him ; and now that he felt they had much reason for their outcry they were trebly irritating and distasteful to him.

But when his man of business had left him he remembered them, and broke the seals of two or three of the later ones, and glanced rapidly over their contents, passing over their oft-repeated conjurations and condemnations in search for the recurrence of his cousin's name. He found it more than once. In the last letter, which had a date of two months past, the writer wrote :

‘The whole world is, I think, in accord in attributing your wife's retreat to the influence of your cousin. It may be right, it may be wrong, but it is certain that it thinks that he, much more than you, has had power to determine her selection. I give no opinion myself. Of course I always saw that he was more than commonly attached to her, but he is a man of honour, and he would not throw his name to the four winds of earth as you throw yours for

the sake of any woman. Still, he is mortal, and the position he occupies is at once very dangerous and very insidious in its appeal to his sympathies. He is the only person whom she ever sees, and the only friend who is admitted to advise her. His sister has repeatedly argued with him to induce him to see this as the world sees it; but always in vain. He appears to consider that he is the natural heir to the duties which you have declined to fulfil; to what extent do you choose him to be so? Whatever may happen, you cannot complain that it happens to you undeservedly.'

He read the lines with great wrath and intolerant impatience; then tore the letter up and with it those of similar strain which had preceded it. She was always a mischief-maker; seeing what did not exist, straining at gnats, weaving ropes of moonshine, setting friend against friend, and sowing the seeds of disunion under the plausible pretext, and perhaps in the honest persuasion, that she was pleasing God and serving man. He had always known her to be like that ever since he had been of age enough to be at all observant of what she did; she was

a good woman—yes—like thousands and tens of thousands of good women who have all the virtues in their own persons, but have not in their temperaments one chord of sympathy, one fibre of indulgence, one touch of that erring human nature which makes the world akin, one single impulse of that sweet and tender kindness which soothes and stills and comforts maladies which it cannot cure.

A perfectly good woman—yes—and as utterly incapable of doing any real good by her influence as though she were the vilest of her sex! How many of them there are on earth, and how many men have lived to curse them as they never curse the sinners! He threw the fragments of her letters with hatred into the waters of the canal beneath his window. He knew the irrepressible pleasure in her own accuracy of prediction, in the vindication of her own forebodings by the present facts, which had been in her, all unknown to her, while she had penned all the invectives and lamentations which had preceded and followed her introduction of Aubrey's name. Some hatred he felt against himself, whose actions had given up the fair name of Gladys to the malevolent

speculation of the world and to the gratified jealousies of his sister.

He remembered her as he had seen her first in her father's garden in the late autumn afternoon, with the dog's head leaning against her knee and the red foliage of the early autumn touching her hair. What a base return he had given for that sincere and simple welcome! She had spoiled his life innocently, and he had spoiled hers criminally. Absolve himself as he would, his conscience perpetually returned to convict him of his offence. He forgot the intervening years, and only thought of her as John Vernon's daughter; the fair and innocent child of the days before her marriage. His feelings were capricious and ephemeral, but they rarely lacked generosity, and he felt that he to her had been ungenerous; that he had not allowed enough for her youth and her inexperience, that he had brought against her ignorance all the unequal forces of worldly knowledge and trained intelligence, and that he had received her life into his hand in the mere unformed clay of girlhood only to throw it in pieces among the potsherds of calumny when it had become the full amphora of womanhood. Again and again

this image of her recurred to him with increasing reproach. He felt an uneasy and restless wish to return to his own country for a moment, and to see for himself what truth there was in all these stories of Aubrey's visits to her. He did not doubt the facts ; but he doubted, or, rather, he refused to believe, the construction put on them by others. Aubrey had always been her friend, he certainly would not have ceased to be so ; but from friendship to love there were distances which he did not credit that his cousin would ever pass. The honour which fenced in the wives of other men had never seemed to Guilderoy a very high or impassable fence ; but the honour which surrounded his own seemed to him sacred and high as heaven. Yet he thought often, and with ever-increasing irritation, of that stormy and sorrowful isolation of Christslea in the winter solstice which was again so near.

His anger deepened against her with his remorse. She had rejected all his offers, she had withdrawn herself from his home, she had brought the condemnation and observation of the world upon him by the extravagance and strangeness of her actions. So he thought and

so he reasoned to himself ; but all his anger could not extinguish his consciousness of having drawn her into a position which scarcely any woman of her years could possibly issue from unharmed and unslandered.

He had thought her cold, irresponsible, unsympathetic ; but he had been always sensible of the fineness and purity of many qualities of her character, and he knew that they were those to which he could alone now look for self-control and self-sacrifice strong enough to bear her unharmed through such an ordeal of isolation and abandonment.

‘ If I could speak to her,’ he thought more than once ; but that was forbidden him by ten thousand reasons. His word had been passed to the woman whom he loved ; his desires had been granted him on a condition which was the more imperious because based solely on his honour ; he knew that if he again broke his word to her, even though in the very smallest and slightest thing, he would fall lower than the lowest in her sight, and would be degraded beyond words in his own for ever. He had received the gifts of her life on certain terms which were a millionfold more binding on him

because merely left to his own good faith. His knowledge of Beatrice Soria told him that the meanest galley-slave at work on the quays of Naples would seem to her infinitely manlier and worthier than he if in the merest trifle he transgressed the stipulation she had made.

She had left him wholly free to accept or refuse her condition, but she had understood, and had had the right to understand, that the condition, if accepted, was inviolate. He did not reproach her for it ; she could have asked no less, looking both to the past and to the future. Nor could he have said that he regretted it ; for he was still happy, although one fear and one remorse assailed him ; the fear that though he had again recovered his position towards her, he had never recovered his influence over her ; and the remorse that he had been disloyal to the promises he had given to John Vernon.

In all his faults and follies he had been a man of delicate honour, as the world construes the conventional honour it demands of a gentleman ; he had never given the world the title to deride or to disdain him ; he had always been careful to keep his name out of the mud of public discussion and conjecture ; and he was

morbidly sensitive to the fact that for the first time in the history of his race a shadow, if not a stain, had been cast upon his name : one which might deepen and darken as the years passed away, and most probably would do so, whilst he would be powerless to efface it and would have but himself to thank for it. In the conflict of feelings which had agitated him in his last interview with his wife, he had not reflected on the innumerable consequences inevitable on his action. He had only seen, on the one side, a woman whom he passionately regretted and loved, and on the other a woman who chilled, fretted, offended, and alienated him. He had chosen between them on a natural impulse, with scarce a moment's hesitation ; and he had cast hardly a thought to the many difficulties and penalties which would follow on his choice.

All his life long things had gone well with him. The most serious sorrow of it had been his repentance for his rupture with Beatrice Sorìa, and she had been entirely right when she had told him that all the phases of his love had been rather gallantry than passion. Deep and painful emotions were novel to him and hate-

ful. But they now forced their way into his thoughts, and would not be gainsaid.

He knew well the estimates of men of the world ; their large tolerance of many, and their intolerance of some few, things. He knew that amongst these few must be his own action in driving so young and blameless a woman as his wife into her present position. He knew that his contemporaries, however elastic in judgment, must be now his severest critics, not for what he had done as for how he had done it. He had put himself outside the pale of those easy indulgences which the world willingly accords so long as no violence is offered to its codes of convention.

He was proud, and his pride was hurt at the mere thought of how all his friends and acquaintances were speaking of him whenever they remembered him at all ; and they would so remember because of the prominence of Aubrey's name. With little right or justice in his anger, he grew each day more deeply angered with his cousin. He persuaded himself that it must have been Aubrey's influence which had decided so young a woman as Gladys to lead so strange and wretched a life.

‘I left her everything she could want or wish,’ he thought in his self-justification. ‘She was free to live in the world at her pleasure; I had taken care that no blame should rest on her, and I had given her the half of all I possessed; she might have been happy, quite happy, in her own way if she had chosen; it was not I who exiled her to a cottage by a lonely weather-beaten shore, and bade her exist on the pittance that came to her from her father.’

Why could she not have continued to enjoy all those material consolations and compensations with which he had so liberally surrounded her? If she had done that, his conscience would have been at rest, and the world would have seen in their separation nothing but a mutual and excusable agreement to lead their lives apart.

It must have been Aubrey, he reasoned, who had sustained her in her headstrong and extravagant resolution; it was just such a choice as would commend itself to him, austere, romantic, and unworldly.

After a few weeks of irresolution and of many agitated and conflicting impulses,

he said abruptly and with much embarrassment to the Duchess Sorìa :

‘It is absolutely necessary that I should go to England. Would you allow and not misconstrue it?’

She looked at him some moments before she replied :

‘My dear, I am not your keeper. And I suppose you have honour.’

He felt himself colour under the profound gaze of her deep eyes. He kissed her hand with emotion.

‘I thank you,’ he said simply ; he knew that he had once given her every cause to mistrust him for ever. Her confidence in him seemed very noble, and appealed to him as no expressions of doubt or of fear could have done.

‘I am utterly unworthy of her !’ he thought bitterly. How often his suspicions had wronged her in days that were gone by ; how little fitted he had been to be the supreme passion of such a woman’s life !

Several days passed by ; she asked him neither why he lingered nor when he would go. That reserve in one to whom he had given

every title to doubt his word in their past relations seemed to him very magnanimous.

He loved her, he thought, more than he had ever loved her, but all the strength of his admiration could not drive out from him the restless, haunting remembrance of what might be then being said and being done in England.

It was now well-nigh mid-winter ; there, dreary, misty, cold, with drifting snows ; here gay, luminous, brilliant, with gorgeous sunsets and buoyant wind-tossed seas.

‘ I shall be away but a very little while,’ he said to her with hesitation.

‘ Go as you will,’ she answered him. He felt that these reins let fall thus upon his neck did in truth and honour hold him more closely than all chains.

‘ Ah ! if only you had always been as kind and as generous,’ he murmured, thinking of those other days when her impetuous demands and her violent exactions had chafed his soul into revolt.

She smiled with a little sadness.

‘ Alas, alas !’ she thought, ‘ men should not quarrel as they do with our jealousies and importunities ; when we cease to feel them life

has taken the tenderest fibre out of our hearts. I am never jealous of him now ; but sometimes I wish to Heaven that it were only possible that I could be ! It is those tempests of folly which give birth to the sweetest of our joys.'

She would have given half that she possessed could she only once more have felt all those intense and exquisite pains which are the procreation of the richest joys, could only his absence have tortured her, his presence intoxicated her, as it had once done.

Was it mere caprice or wantonness of fate that now, when he was so utterly her own in all ways, she had so little gladness in her empire ?

Was it indifference, or pride, or really magnanimity which made her leave him unquestioned to go whither he would ?

'Nay,' she thought, and rightly. 'He could not now be faithless to his promise if he would. The handless and footless god that smote Glaucus would smite him for me. He would be the lowest of the low.'

And she let him go, and asked him nothing.

'Alas !' she thought again. 'It is when

men most curse us that they should bless us most. All that immense love which raises them into the deities of our lives only wearies them, satiates them, and makes them cold and fretful; and yet, if only they knew, how much better we are when we can still feel it!—what poor, innocent, fond fools, though so burdensome to them! And when it is gone, it is gone for ever, and something which was best in us is gone too, and we live for our senses, or for our triumphs, or for our intelligences, but we live for a great love no more! But we have learned wisdom, and wit comes to us where adoration has died, and our lovers find us calmer, and they deem their loss their gain—fools, fools, both we and they!’

CHAPTER LIII.

HE went without halt across Europe to his own country ; the weather was cold and dark, the seas were stormy, the winds piercingly cold ; after the radiance and the softness of the land he had left, it seemed to him like entering some dreary Gehenna of tormented and icy air. He travelled straightway to Ladysrood, and went thither unannounced. He had old and faithful servants who kept all others of the household in obedience and subjection ; but the great house had a desolate air in its utter abandonment. There was little light, little warmth, all the furniture of the rooms was shrouded in its linen coverings, and only in the central hall was there a large fire burning. His step sounded hollow on floors from which their zealous thrift had removed the carpets, and the hastily-lit lamps struggled feebly against the general gloom.

‘I have always told you to keep the house as perfectly ready as though you expected me at any moment,’ he said with anger.

The people were afraid to reply that after so many months of absence his arrival had seemed to them the most unlikely of all possible chances.

The silence, the coldness, and the loneliness of his home chilled him to the bone. It seemed an emblem of that solitude to which Gladys was condemned in her youth. The night was very cold, and one of the wild winter storms of the south-west country raged without until morning. He slept very little, and rose from his bed unrefreshed. He regretted that he had come there. He sighed for the evergreen orange and magnolia groves, the purpling violets, the unfrozen fountains, the dancing sun-rays of the glad gardens of the Soria Palace. Here was the winter of the earth and the winter of the soul. He cursed the morbid restlessness, the uneasy discontent, which had drawn him from his paradise.

Now that he was here, what more could he know than he knew? He could not seek his wife; the woman whom he loved had trusted

him ; he had too much good faith and sentiment of honour left in him not to be true to an unwritten bond.

The storm had subsided with dawn, but the day was dull and heavy, the skies were obscured, and the air was charged with vapour. The sense of immense weariness and depression, which had in other years always come upon him in England in winter, returned upon him a thousand-fold now. He passed the forenoon in his library in intercourse with his men of business and stewards, in the examination of those questions of leasehold and freehold, of forest rights and moor rights, of rents and investments, which had been the ostensible reason of his momentary return home. It was well for him that those who served him had truly his interest at heart, for he heeded very little the explanations which they gave him, and signed many papers without knowing very clearly why he did so. He was thinking, as he apparently attended to the prolix arguments of his visitants, of the day when, in that chamber, he had written the letter which had broken off his relations with Beatrice Sorìa. He was overwhelmed with the greatness of her

pardon when he thought of that unutterable insult to the proudest of all living women. Then his memories wandered away from her to that other day when he had held the *Horæ* open for a young girl to read, and watched her first blush rise like sunrise over her fair face. It was only five years before, and in those five years what suffering he had caused to both these women ; and yet how well one at the least still loved him, if the other—what of the other?—even if she had been ever too passionless to care for him, yet how much she had lost through him !

The tedious grey day wore away slowly ; most of its hours occupied with prosaic details and dull discussions of ways and means, of law and equity, of forestry and finance, and all the various matters of importance which grow out of the management of great estates and of a great fortune. It was dusk when his people left him ; he remained in the library beside the hearth, where there was not even a dog to welcome him.

‘ Where is Kenneth ? ’ he asked of a servant who came in at that moment to light the chandeliers. Kenneth was a colley which had

been a chief favourite with both himself and Gladys.

The man hesitated with some embarrassment as to how he should reply.

‘Where are Kenneth and the other house-dogs?’ repeated his master impatiently. The servant answered timidly that her ladyship had sent for them to Christslea a year ago.

‘Ah, of course; they were hers,’ Guilderoy replied quickly, regretful of his question.

She had been quite within her right to take the dogs, nor did he grudge her their innocent companionship; but the kind brown eyes of Kenneth and his comrades, if they had been there to look at him then, would have seemed to break the spell of this horrible loneliness, to ease the burden of these painful memories which weighed on him.

The evening was yet more gloomy than the day. He paced to and fro the suite of the Queen Anne apartments wearily and drearily. They were all restored to their fullest comfort, and had all that light and warmth and the fragrance of hothouse flowers could bring to them, but to him they were immeasurably, unconscionably melancholy.

All his past life came before him in those solitary hours. He recalled all his childish ideals, his boyish admirations of great men, his vague dreams as a youth of some greatness which he would achieve, some added lustre which he would bring to his name and race. Where had all these gone? In what had all these ended? In the lassitude and languor of satiety, in the nerveless indifference of a polished pessimist, in the evaporated fumes of innumerable pleasures quickly tasted and exhausted.

‘At least I *have* enjoyed,’ he thought. ‘Could Aubrey say as much?’

But though his philosophy consoled, his conscience did not satisfy, him. It was not for mere self-indulgence that his fathers had alone lived; it was not by mere self-abandonment that his country had been made what it once had been.

Great men had, indeed, in all ages been lovers of pleasure, but pleasure had been their pastime, not their sole pursuit. He walked to and fro the length of the now warm and illuminated rooms, and his surveys of his past brought him more dissatisfaction than content-

ment. To men he knew that he seemed but an idler ; to women, perhaps, he seemed a traitor.

The vision of his wife alone in that lonely little house, amongst the dense sea-fogs and the bare black orchards, haunted him with pain ; and the memory of the woman whom he loved as he had left her in the splendour of her beauty, and of the golden evening sunlight pouring through her painted chamber, haunted him with that irresistible and unresisted power which she always possessed over him. In the depression of his solitary musings he seemed in his own sight unworthy of either of them, and wholly undeserving of their constancy or their regret.

Before he slept he sent for the old house-keeper of Ladysrood. She had been with his mother on her death-bed, and had nursed and played with him as a child. He could ask of her what he could not bring himself to ask of any of the men.

‘Tell me, Margaret,’ he said to her as soon as she stood before him in the warm red drawing-room, where John Vernon had bade his daughter live for honour if she could not

live for happiness—‘tell me, do you ever see my wife?’

The old woman was silent for awhile; the tears started to her eyes.

‘Alas, my dear lord, that ever you should have to ask me that!’ she murmured.

‘Never mind why I ask you; answer me. Do you often see her or ever see her?’

‘I have seen her very rarely, my lord, and never to speak to; it was in the open air, and my lady shunned me.’

‘How does she look?’

‘She looks older, but she looks well, my lord. The air is very fine and strong at Christ'slea.’

Guilderoy felt a sense of mortification, for which he hated himself.

‘She looks well, do you say?’

‘Not ill, my lord, but much older.’

‘You must hear of her often from the servants or the villagers?’

‘There is little to hear, my lord.’

‘You mean that she leads such a retired, such a secluded life?’

‘That is so, my lord. It is the same life as her father led; it suited him, no doubt,

but it cannot suit a childless woman of her years.'

Guilderoy sighed impatiently.

'It was her own choice.'

The housekeeper was silent ; she respected him too much to contradict him, and she respected truth too well to agree with him.

'She has all the dogs, they say ?' he asked.

'Yes, my lord ; she was ever very fond of the tykes.'

'And how does she spend her time ?'

'Reading, they say, my lord, when she is indoors ; and always out when the weather holds, and ofttimes even when it is very bad.'

'And who does she see ?'

'No one, I believe, my lord.'

'Not my sister ?'

'Her ladyship has never been nigh her.'

He hesitated a moment, then said :

'But she receives visits from my cousin Aubrey, I am sure ?'

'Well, my lord, he is the only one of the family who has stood by her.'

'I am grateful to him.'

Nevertheless his face flushed with an emotion which was not one of pleasure.

‘Is he often there?’

‘Often, my lord, one may say, for one who is ever toiling for the country as he is, and has so little time left to himself.’

‘It is very good of him. You may go, Margaret. Good-night.’

The old woman curtsied, and withdrew ; but as she drew near the door she took courage and came a few steps back towards him. ‘My dear lord, if I may make so bold, my lady is very young to be left in that lonely life. Maybe she chose it, but some say she was drove to it. She may have her faults, but she has more virtues, and—and—she lost her two children, my lord. Will you not go and see her now you are here, if only for sake of that one memory, my lord?’

Guilderoy’s eyes grew dim.

‘No, no, I cannot do that,’ he said hastily and sternly. ‘But you are a good woman to urge it, Margaret. You do not offend me. Good-night.’

‘Good-night to you, my lord.’

The door closed on her, and he was alone with his own thoughts, which were painful companions.

He had an intense wish to see Gladys, a wish stronger than his anger against her. But all that remained to him of loyalty to a woman who had trusted him to be faithful to her forbade him such double duplicity. The words 'Go, you have honour,' were ever in his remembrance. Any interview with his wife, any effort even to seek one, any single word which could even distantly foreshadow the faintest reconciliation with her, were forbidden to him ; he had plainly and for ever renounced any possibility of such when he had accepted the conditions on which the woman he loved had again become his.

To have accepted them only to break them, to have had the fulness of her faith only to cheat and evade it as a man can ever do if he wills, would have seemed to him something so foul that he would not have borne his life under the sense of degradation which such an act of betrayal would have left on him. His honour might rooted in dishonour stand, but it was at least loyal to the one who had trusted to it. Yet a great desire was upon him to see his wife ; the remembrance of her was upon him as he had known her in the early days of Christlea,

and that remembrance softened his heart towards her and outweighed the heavy and bitter memories of their last interview in Naples. The night passed with him again sleeplessly and painfully.

The winds were high and swept round the stately and solid house with gusts of fury ; the stillness between them was filled with the sound of rushing rains. The day broke, with no rain falling, but with low and heavy clouds. At noon he rode out in its gloom, and through his woods towards the moors ; rode fast against the watery cold air, over the soaked turf, and thinking ever as he went of the time he had ridden thus to seek John Vernon, on a mere idle caprice which waywardness and imagination had raised into a fancied passion for one fleeting hour. The sky was low, the sea was still, the earth was silent as he went ; the dull atmosphere and the melancholy solitude oppressed him as with some sensation of physical ill. Through the mist which hung everywhere over the water and the land the few distant sails on the sea, the few forms passing on the moors of men or cattle, looked unsubstantial and unreal. To him, whose life was always passed in movement or

in pleasure, in the gratification either of the senses or of the intelligence, the winter stillness and loneliness of the country and the shore had a feeling of death in them.

His horse, tired with the wet and heavy ground, went slowly, and he did not urge it to more speed; he rode on, lost in his own thoughts, taking, almost without knowing it, the road to the cottage of Christslea. He had the fullest resolve not to see his wife, nor to allow himself to be seen by her; yet with an unconscious and irresistible impulsion he took his way towards the place where she dwelt, until from the level turf of the cliffs above the house he looked down on its thatched roof, its peaked gables, its thick environment of tangled branches. There was not a sound coming from it; a little smoke hung on the vaporous air; a few pigeons flew low under its eaves; a holly-tree stood glowing with scarlet berries tall and straight against the sky. To him, come from the vast palaces and marble terraces and sun-bathed gardens of the south, it looked like almost a hovel, with its humble lowliness and modest colouring so like the brown earth and the grey boughs which surrounded it. It hurt his pride

to think that his wife should live there in penury and obscurity. She bore his name, she was the mistress of his houses, she had a right to his riches and his possessions of all kinds, and she dwelt here in less comfort and less stateliness than the wife of his steward enjoyed !

And all his world knew it, and any one of his friends who chose could come and see the poorness and lowliness of her lot !

He dismounted and walked to the edge of the cliff and let his horse stray as it would, blown and heated, cropping the short wet turf to its own hurt.

A vague desire to enter the house and ask for her and see her face to face was in him. But he would have been perjured and degraded had he yielded to it. Far away in the golden light of the Neapolitan day was a woman who had said to him—‘ You have honour.’

He remembered her, and to her at least was faithful.

On the tableland of the cliff near at hand was the little barn-like, rustic church of this small sea-parish, and around it were those obscure graves of which John Vernon’s was one, conspicuous amongst the low-lying headstones

by the fair column of white marble she and he had raised there to his memory with one line graven on it in the language he best loved :

Mori est felicitis, antequam mortem invocet.

He looked at the white pillar looming faintly through the sea-fog, and had he been a woman he could have wept.

‘I was false to him, I was false to him !’ he thought ; and his heart ached with the futile pang of a regret which cannot reach or atone to the dead.

He had too often pardoned to himself his own transgressions, too often too carelessly excused to himself errors and follies which he thought lightly of because they were welcome and easy ; but the sense of his own disloyalty he could not palliate or smooth away with sophistry ; he deemed it a dishonour and he hated it.

For the first time in all his years he was guilty in his own sight. He had promised what he had not fulfilled ; he had been untrue to a man who could no more call his actions to account. As he stood looking down on the russet roof and the tangled wood in the shadowy

misty winter's morning, he saw the figure of a woman leave the porch and pass under the branches outwards towards the shore. He could not see her face from his position so far above her, but he could see by her figure, by her bearing, by her step, that the housekeeper had said truly—she was in perfect health and strength.

She walked quickly and firmly ; the dogs leaping on her and running on before her. She wore the long black cloak of sables in which he had seen her last in Naples. For some minutes he lost her from view under the trees ; then she appeared again upon the strip of sandy shore, where the waves were rolling up with low angry murmur as though exhausted by the fury of the past night. Then she turned from the sea, and mounted the cliff path leading to the churchyard. He perceived that she had a basket of evergreens and snowdrops in her hand ; she was coming no doubt on her daily errand of visiting her father's grave. The mist was lighter now, and, though some way off her, he saw her plainly as she mounted the steep path cut in the granite of the cliff, so familiar to her from her childhood.

‘What a life ! what a life !’ he thought, ‘what a wretched life if she have no consolations !’

A violent impulse moved him to demand from her if there were any, if the gossip of the world was true which traced to Aubrey’s influence her choice of this seclusion ; he wished to tell her that he would be the last to blame her if it were so, and that here, within sight of her father’s grave, he would ask her pardon and give her his ; so at least there might be peace between them.

And yet, as he watched her from the distance crossing the grass of the cliffs with that elastic step which he had so often admired, and which all women had envied her, a more sombre and more ignoble feeling moved him, a restless jealousy of past possession, a sense that the dignity of his name was in her hands and that she could play with it as she chose, and that he had lost the right to blame her, whatever she might select to do with it.

He watched her pass across the tableland towards the graveyard ; she did not look towards him ; she went straight on to the wicket of the

burial-place, opened it, and passed within ; the growth of rose-thorn and privet and holly within its low walls of rubble hid her entirely from him.

He hesitated a moment ; a great, almost an ungovernable, wish arose in him to go there and to say to her by her father's grave all the truths which had been so imperfectly uttered in the haste and bitterness of their last interview.

But a thousand miles away a woman trusted him !

To approach his wife, were it even only to say to her an eternal farewell, would be to be a traitor to his pledged word.

He had often been the slave of his passions, the fool of his fancy, but he had always been the servant of his honour.

One ill is not mended by another he knew ; one defalcation is not filled up by another ; because he had been untrue to the dead man lying there was no reason or excuse that he should be untrue to the living woman who loved him.

He had voluntarily renounced his right to seek or to give explanations from and to his

wife. It was one of those privileges of intimacy which he had of his own accord consented to abjure for ever.

He looked once more at the dusky foliage of the churchyard with the slender white column rising into the grey air; and with a sigh he drew his horse's bridle towards him, and led the beast down the precipitous and broken path which turned away from Christslea.

CHAPTER LIV.

WITH evening he had left his own house, having learned nothing more than he had known before, but carrying with him in his soul the thorns of a restless disquietude and of an impotent regret.

He reached London in the morning and went straight to Balfrons House. Parliament had met and Aubrey was in town. There was a heavy rain falling, and the air was full of ice and sleet. The streets at that early hour were deserted. The city seemed a vast, colourless, smoking city of the dead.

Aubrey had risen with the day after an hour or two's rest after a prolonged debate. He was in his study, walking up and down the room and dictating to his secretaries before he broke his fast. The yellow and sickly air poured through the chamber dark with bookshelves and bronzes and tables laden and littered with documents of all kinds.

When he saw his cousin enter he paused in the dictation of his letters, and stood still, without any word of gesture or greeting.

‘Can I see you alone for a moment?’ asked Guilderoy as he entered.

Aubrey motioned to the young men to leave them; they passed into the large library beyond and closed the door.

Aubrey still spoke no word. He stood erect, the habitual stoop in his great height changed to a stateliness that was almost stiffness. He never held out his hand or said any syllable of greeting or of inquiry, his features were cold and stern.

Guilderoy heeded neither his attitude nor his expression.

Twelve months and more had passed by since they had met at Venice and had parted with unuttered but mutual hostility and offence. The knowledge which he had of Aubrey’s certain scorn and condemnation of him gave to him an hauteur and an imperious impatience which seemed to his cousin mere arrogance, unbecoming, insolent, and out of place.

Guilderoy was very pale, and his eyes looked sleepless, but he had the manner and

the courage of a man who arraigns another for wrong done to him, and is very far from all confession of error in himself.

‘I am about to put to you a question which no man answers,’ he said rapidly and without preface of explanation of his appearance there. ‘At least no man answers in the affirmative. But whether affirmative or denial be in your case the truth, I expect the truth from you, having regard to the blood relationship between us and the position in which we have always stood to one another.’

Aubrey looked him full in the eyes.

‘What is your question?’ he asked in his coldest voice; a passing expression of ineffable disdain came over his features as he spoke.

‘It is a very simple one,’ said Guilderoy. ‘Are you, as the world says, my wife’s lover?’

Aubrey’s eyes met his fully.

‘I certainly need not answer,’ he replied with a grave rebuke and scorn in his voice and in his gaze. ‘You have lost all title to put such a question.’

‘I have not lost the right, since she bears my name.’

‘You have lost it morally, not legally. You could not be so ungenerous as to refuse a liberty which you take.’

Guilderoy’s face flushed hotly.

‘If you prevaricate I shall consider prevarication admission.’

Aubrey smiled slightly; a very cold, contemptuous smile.

‘It is not my habit to prevaricate. I will answer your question, though I shall refuse to admit your title to put it to me. I am not your wife’s lover, and if you had the slightest knowledge of my character you would not come to me on such an errand.’

Guilderoy was silent. He did not doubt the truth of the speaker; the whole country would have taken Aubrey’s word unwitnessed against that of all other men; but he was dissatisfied.

‘If you deny that you are her lover,’ he said after long silence, ‘you cannot deny that you have for her a feeling which is far beyond friendship, that you visit her in her solitude, that your assiduous attentions to her are matter of notoriety.’

‘Am I bound to account to you for feelings

unuttered to any human ear? Am I bound to respect for you ties which you have yourself strained to rupture? By what title do you come here? You have forsaken your wife utterly. You have told me that she was wearisome, unsympathetic, indifferent to you. What is it to you what I feel for her, or what I do not feel? I deny your right to attempt to penetrate my feelings, or to arraign my acts.'

He spoke with a force which was almost violence, and with a scorn which penetrated the very innermost fibres of his hearer's nerves.

'In every syllable of your answer you confess what you feel!' he said with equal violence. 'I may have no title to command my wife's affections; I never possessed them; but she is the holder of my name, and my name is dear to me, and no man shall play with it without being compelled to atone to me.'

Aubrey looked at him with unspeakable disdain. 'What would you do? What could you do? A man who has abandoned his wife cannot challenge either her enemies or her lovers; he is nothing in her life. If I were to her what you suppose, what could you say to me in common decency or justice? I should

but have filled up the place you left vacant. I should but have soothed the wounds which you caused. You would have no shadow of title to arraign me for it. Even the world itself would prefer my errors to yours, would admit that you had but the payment you merited.'

'I care neither what the world would say nor what you would think,' said Guilderoy, now white with passion. 'I care for the honour of my name, and I should not pause either for your relationship to me or for the admirable lucidity of your reasonings if I believed that you had done me any wrong which would make me absurd and degraded before other men.'

Aubrey smiled; the same slight, contemptuous, fleeting smile, which stung Guilderoy like the stroke of a whip, stung him in his pride, his sensitiveness, and his conscience all at once.

'You would make a scandal?' said Aubrey coldly. 'You would do unwisely. Men whose names are before the world should keep them clean and hold them high. We might agree to kill each other *en cachette*, but if we called the public in to witness our quarrel we should be

worse than fools. We are not playing a melodrama of elective affinities ; we are living out our lives before a world which hates us, and is every hour of its day gaping at us to find a chink in our harness or a stain on our shields. You must gratify it if you will. I shall not aid you. I am not the lover of your wife. I have never spoken any word to her that you would not have been free to hear. I have stood by her, certainly, under the unmerited neglect and obloquy which have fallen on her through you. I should so stand by any innocent woman whose friend I once had been. And so much I admit to you not for my own sake or yours, nor yet because I in any way admit your rights or am moved by your menaces, but because such a declaration is due to her—since it is the truth, so help me God.’

There was a tone in the last solemn words which stilled the fury and awed the soul of his hearer. Guilderoy doubted no more.

‘I believe you,’ he said briefly. ‘The whole nation would believe your bare word. I wish to Heaven,’ he added with emotion, ‘that she had been yours, not mine ; we should all have been far happier than we are.’

‘Such regrets are useless,’ said Aubrey. ‘The greatest burden of man’s life has been created by man, and it is called the holy state of marriage. But—this I must say to you too—if you imagine that she cares for me you are in great error. She cares for you alone. You may bruise her heart as you choose; your name is still the only one written in it.’

‘Do not tell me so,’ said Guilderoy hastily and with pain. ‘It can make no difference now.’

‘I have told you so because it is so.’

‘That may be. It can make no difference in me.’

Aubrey was silent.

‘You intend always to live as you are living now?’

‘I must in honour.’

‘And you leave her virtually widowed at twenty-two years of age, and you exact her fidelity!’

‘I exact nothing. And I beg to apologise to you for the time which I have wasted for you in a demand which, as I have expressed my belief, was founded on unjust suspicions.’

He lingered a moment, waiting for some ex-

pression in return from Aubrey, some farewell, some acknowledgment of his last words. But Aubrey remained standing where he was and said nothing. He did not offer his hand; his features were very cold, his expression almost harsh. He allowed his cousin to leave him without any word or gesture of valediction.

Guilderoy bowed to him in silence and quitted the room.

‘If I did not belong to my family and my country, I should kill him before he reaches the street,’ thought Aubrey when the door closed, as the fire ran through his veins of that old barbaric passion which sleeps in the blood of all men of high courage and strong feeling.

CHAPTER LV.

IN the following week, he stood on the cliff above Christslea, having responded to a wistful message asking for his return there.

‘Why have you sent for me?’ he asked her.

‘Why do you never come to me unless I send?’

He looked away from her.

‘Why,’ she persisted, ‘you used to come and see me so very often.’

Aubrey hesitated.

‘The world is suspicious, my dear,’ he said at last; ‘and you are a very young, and, though you always seem to forget it, a beautiful woman. I do not wish them to say evil things of you.’

She coloured violently.

‘They would never say of us——’

‘I fear they do, dear.’

She was silent; her face was very flushed and pained.

‘How evil the world is!’ she murmured. ‘But let them say what they will. It does not matter. We know——’

‘It matters for you.’

He moved uneasily; his position towards her became every day of his life more embarrassing to him, more strained, more difficult. The very frankness and perfectness of her confidence in him was an added embarrassment the more.

It seemed brutal to rob her of her only solace, to suggest misconstruction to so much innocence and courage, to place between himself and her the constraint which such a warning must of necessity create.

She sat on the edge of the cliff, unconsciously plucking the little flowerets of the wild thyme which grew so thickly there. He stood beside her and looked down on her.

‘Gladys,’ he said abruptly, ‘my cousin came to me a few days ago.’

Her face lost its warmth and grew very cold.

‘I heard that he had been a night at Ladysrood,’ she answered.

‘Yes. He did not approach you?’

‘Can you think that he would dare?’

‘You forget, he has still the right.’

‘He has no moral right; no right on earth that I acknowledge.’

‘You are too harsh, my dear. His rights always exist; and, whether you will hear it or not, I must say to you that I believe his feelings for you are not wholly dead, as you think.’

She cast the gathered thyme upon the grass, and rose to her feet.

‘I care nothing what they are or are not. His life is dead to mine.’

‘Is that how your father would have had you speak?’

‘My father was a good and wise man, but he knew nothing of a woman’s heart.’

‘Perhaps he knew so much that he believed its forgiveness inexhaustible and its patience divine—as they should be.’

She was silent. She stood looking out to the grey wind-blown sea. Her eyes were cold and had no relenting in them, her face had grown pale.

‘Some women may be made like that,’ she said at last. ‘I am not. He has made his life

without me. I have made mine without him. That is all. Why talk of it?’

‘How have you made your life? Child that you are, do you mean that you can live all your lonely years like this—always like this, until old age comes to you?’

‘Women live so in convents. Why not I?’

‘Women in convents live unnatural lives, as from mistaken motives you are doing. Every life without the natural indulgence of its sentiments and affections is restricted, barren, and unblest.’

She was again silent; her eyes watching afar off a fishing-boat tossing in the deep trough of the waves.

‘Why do you say these things to me?’ she asked at last. ‘Surely, when one is left alone, there are more dignity and decency in passive acquiescence in one’s fate than in any noisy revolt against it?’

‘Yes; but if he returned to you? Would your pride stand in the way of reconciliation?’

‘Has he told you to ask me that?’

‘No; he said nothing which could even suggest it. But it was clear to me that he

regretted his own actions, and regret is always near repentance.'

'He will never feel repentance, nor even any very real regret. He may feel inconvenience, irritation, anxiety for the world's opinion—caprice, fatigue, satiety—nothing more.'

'I begin to think that you have never loved him, Gladys.'

'Perhaps not.'

He looked at her, troubled and perplexed by her tone; seeing no way into her real meaning, wondering at her strength in keeping the secret of her own feelings so closely in such long solitude.

'There is no love,' he said almost harshly, 'where there is any consideration of self. There may be desire, pride, pique, egotism; but there is no love. I have told you so many times. I should wish your own heart to tell it you without me.'

'Are all feeling, all sacrifice, all pain, then, to be on one side alone?'

'A great love never asks that question, my dear. It gives all it has to give, unweighed.'

Something in his voice as he spoke, something in his expression as he looked down on

her, went to her heart with a sudden sense of what his feeling was for her. She had never thought of it before; she had taken all his faithful and tender friendship as created rather by his position towards Guilderoy than by any personal devotion to herself. She had been engrossed in that absorbing selfishness which great suffering creates, and she had passed over unnoticed a thousand things which might have told her what he felt had not her whole thoughts and her whole emotions been given to the tragedy of her own fate. Now some vague perception of the truth came to her, although he had so loyally concealed it. Some sudden sense of all which he had done for her, all which he wasted on her, all which he restrained and denied for her sake, came upon her with a mute, ineffable reproach. How selfish she had been, and how ungenerous, before this immense and unuttered devotion! She dropped her head upon her hands and burst into a passion of tears.

‘Forgive me, forgive me!’ she murmured, weeping, not knowing what she said.

‘I have nothing to forgive, dear,’ he said, surprised and touched to the quick. ‘I want

you to forgive, because I know that, unless you do so, no peace will ever come to you.'

He waited a moment, but she made no reply.

'I must go now,' he said, 'or I shall not be able to be in London to-night. Will you think of what I have said? The day will come when you will have occasion to think of it. And, my dear, do not deem me unkind if I cease my visits to you. They are ill-judged by the world, and they displease my cousin. Of course, if you ever need me greatly I will come; but not habitually, familiarly, as I have come of late.'

Her face changed, and her brows contracted almost sullenly.

'You will sacrifice me to him!'

'No. But I will not sacrifice you to the evil construction of either your husband or the world.'

'I thought you had more courage!'

Aubrey smiled sadly.

'It is not courage which is wanting to me, my child. Perhaps some day you will understand my motives, if you do not now. Meantime, do not misjudge me nor doubt my sincere regard for all your truest interests.'

The words seemed very cold to her and conventional.

She was very young still, and she longed for tenderness, for indulgence, for an affection which should let her lean her aching life upon it and there find rest.

When he went from her in the dusky, windy, cloudy day the sense of an immense loss came over her ; the solitude of her life closed in on her ; and she saw night descend with terror of its sleepless hours.

CHAPTER LVI.

ON that same day Guilderoy saw once more the smiling sunshine, the green gardens and orange woods, the stately marble walls of the Sorìa Palace. It was late in the afternoon when he reached Naples. A glorious sunset was burning in the west. Innumerable sails covered the sea. The zenith was a deep translucent blue, the air clear and buoyant, with gaiety and healing in its breezes. The streets were mirthful with the sports of early Carnival, and the shouts and songs and clang of brazen music came softened to the ear as he sat once more in the little cabinet of the Albani and looked towards the bay through the marble arches of the loggia beyond.

Whether from pride, magnanimity, or forbearance (he knew not which) Beatrice Sorìa had asked him no questions.

‘You have soon returned,’ she said to him

simply, when he first came to her ; and she had made no after allusion to his absence or its causes. She knew well that if he had broken his word to her he would not have so returned, nay, would never have dared to meet her eyes again.

He longed to tell her all that he had felt ; the sweetest charm of love is the power and privilege of laying bare the soul in all its inconsistencies and follies ; but this pleasure was refused to him by his own action in the past. Where he had been once faithless to her before, delicacy made it impossible for him to say one word which should seem to hint at any regret or any change for or in his present faith to her. That first disloyalty was always there as a spectre between them. It would be impossible to show her all the conflicting emotions which had swayed him by turns during his brief visit to England. He would have been glad to do so ; he felt something of the pathetic human instinct to confide in some one beloved the doubts and the self-reproaches which tormented him, and so in a manner be free of their burden of perplexity. But this he dared not do. Under the circumstances of

their late reunion, any such confidence must inevitably have appeared to be either a hint of desired freedom or a confession of futile regret; either would be an insult to her. He felt that even any shadow which came over his face, any momentary mood of abstracted thought or of visible depression, must seem a tacit admission that he regretted the price which he had paid for the past year of happiness beside her. He knew that he had once seemed to her the forsworn, cowardly, and treacherous slave of his own caprices; he dared risk nothing which could by any kind of possibility place him in such a light to her again. What could such a woman as she was, think of him if she ever felt that, even in the full blessing and glory of her love, he could fret at and begrudge the cost which it had been to him? He respected the stronger courage of her nature, he even respected her for the scorn which now and then flashed out from her upon himself, and he felt both reverence and gratitude for the faithful and fervent passion which she had spent and, in so much wasted, upon his life. Nothing can be more untrue than that in such relations as theirs reverence is impossible;

reverence is excited by character, not by situation, and he had learned to appreciate her nature as he had never done in earlier days. The very completeness and sincerity of the proof which she had demanded from him had showed a force in her before which he felt himself wavering, weak, almost worthless, of a single thought of hers.

He did his uttermost to conceal the depression which weighed upon him ; the distress with which he was haunted when he thought of that little house in the gloom and silence of the lone sea-shore ; the anger and impatient shame with which the recollections of Aubrey's words of scorn moved him whenever they recurred to him.

He knew, he felt, that one living man despised him ; and that man the one whom of all others he most esteemed himself, and most admired. He had always been irritably conscious of the greatness of Aubrey's life as contrasted with the frivolity and self-indulgence of his own. It was an unendurable humiliation to him to be conscious that he had made it possible for his cousin to address to him those scathing words which pursued him in memory

as though they were the very voices of pursuing ghosts.

And although he had received and had accepted his cousin's statement of his relations to his wife, and did honestly in his soul believe them, yet it made him restless and unhappy to know that their intimacy, however harmless, was familiar and unwitnessed, that even, though only her friend, Aubrey was still her only friend and her most loyal servant. It offended, it wounded, it tormented him ; and all his efforts could not conceal from the penetration of Beatrice Sorìà that the lassitude and dissatisfaction which she had observed in him when in her villa on the Brenta in the past autumn had increased greatly since his brief absence, and were rendered even the more visible by the endeavours which he made to hide them under the over-affectation of carelessness or the over-protestation of devotion. She had the intuition and the penetration which are alone possible to a woman who is too learned in love to be the servant of it, and too sure of her power ever to be vain with petty vanities ; she saw in him the reflection of that vague disappointment which had haunted her

in her meditations amongst the autumn beauty of her gardens in the Veneto ; she realised that he too, like herself, though later than she, had failed to find the same wonder-flower which they had found and gathered together in other years. She was generous ; she was proud to arrogance, and she knew human character with a knowledge that made her at once disdainful and impatient of it. She had had her own way ; she had ruled him as she chose ; she had exacted and enjoyed her just vengeance to the uttermost iota ; what more could the future bring her ? And besides this likewise there was in her the generous scorn of a patrician temper to hold by obligation what has fled already in will, to enforce a bond from which the soul had already gone. There was much arrogance in her, and there had been some cruelty, but there was more magnanimity than there was either.

She said nothing to him, but she watched him in the weeks which followed on his return ; and she read his mind as though it had been opened before her like a book. She felt with a pang that what she read there mattered but little to her ; a year before his emotions had been her world, now it seemed of small account that

they should wander from her. What joy would there be in slowly-dying illusion, in slowly-fading rapture, in slowly-chilling passion? What triumph would there be in watching the sure, if gradual, change of ecstasy into monotony, of gratitude into tedium, of fervour into habit? She knew the truth of the Greek counsel, 'Break off the laurel-bough whilst it is yet green, and burn it. Wait not until it withers.' She was an Epicurean, and carried into the passions of her life at once the fires of the senses and the coldness of philosophy. When she had loved him first she had been all fire; now her wisdom was greater than her love, now she could bear to put her heart under the spectrum and watch its pulses change from fast to slow.

The months of Carnival follies passed, and the spring equinox blew open the spathes of the narcissi and called up the golden sceptres of the asphodel in all the southern pastures. One night they strolled together along the white terrace which overhung the sea, as they had done a thousand times in the year just passed and in the other years of a still more gracious time. The full moon was shining, the

murmur of the waves was audible, the air was heavy with the scent of lemon flowers from the gardens beyond. It was Italy, luminous, fragrant, amorous ; yet amidst it all he sighed. The sigh was unconscious, but it was eloquent. She paused and looked at him. A slight smile came on her mouth, half of pity, half of scorn.

‘If you are not happy,’ she said slowly, ‘remember—I am not your gaoler. Say so, and go.’

He started violently, ashamed and bewildered, and ignorant of what he had betrayed.

‘What do you mean?’ he asked. ‘Happy! You have given me a happiness of which one needs to be god, not man, to be worthy!’

‘Yes, you have been happy,’ she said thoughtfully. ‘It is something. Well, go whilst you still are grateful for it.’

‘Go? go where?’

‘Go to your wife.’

Even by the moonlight she saw how white his face grew as he heard her ; he was paralysed with fear and wonder.

‘Why do you insult me?’ he muttered ; ‘you have my word.’

‘Yes ; I have had your word,’ she said

with disdain, but with no anger. 'What is a corpse worth when its soul has fled?'

'You cannot think——'

'I think you are like all men. Once I thought that you were unlike them. But that is long ago.'

He winced under the words as though she had struck him.

'Is it dead in you?' he cried with the passion of despair. 'Can no love live?'

'I know not,' she said wearily. 'Perhaps not; who can tell?'

'I can tell. I love you for ever.'

'In a sense you do, yes.'

She sat down on one of the marble chairs of the terrace; the seat was shaped like a throne, and was covered with a lion's skin. She looked like some great queen come to pass judgment, the silvery tissues and silvery fur of her dress gleamed in the moonbeams, the diamonds which were round her throat shone, her eyes were full of light and heavy with tears.

'My dear, do not let us part in any anger,' she said calmly. 'Anger is so base in those who have been lovers. Once I was angry

often, and to fury even. I would that that time were here still in all its madness, in all its abasement. But it is dead. You have been happier than I in our reunion. I was haunted by the past, which you forgot. I wanted what I could not have—my youth. You had belonged to my youth, and my mind had outgrown you, though I knew it not. Nay, I mean nothing unkind. We change in body and mind. No passion, once broken, will ever bear renewal.’

She sighed heavily; he was silent; he was deeply and cruelly humiliated, and yet he knew that she had spoken the truth of herself, if not of him.

‘Go to your wife,’ she repeated. ‘I am sure that you have seen her, though I am equally sure that you have not spoken with her, for you would never have dared to return to me if you had. You do not care for her; you will never care for her. But she embodies to you peace of mind, social repute, and personal dignity. You attach weight to the opinion of the world. You are wretched if men speak ill of you. With that character neither man nor woman should ever brave the world. They

should leave that temerity to those who have both a great passion and a great courage. They alone can do it and never repent. You repent—now—every hour of your life.’

‘You are cruelly unjust! Never once have I said or thought or felt anything but the very deepest gratitude to you.’

‘In a sense, no. I am not denying that you love me still. I say that, having the temperament you possess, you cannot be content without the world’s esteem. It wearies you to earn it, but without it you are uneasy and ashamed.’

‘You would make me out the very poorest of fools!’

‘No; your feeling is not ignoble, for it comes rather from faithfulness to your race and your traditions than from any minor timidity or selfishness. But, let it spring from what it may, it is in you. You are not a man who can long forget self. You are incapable of a life-long devotion.’

‘If I live you will see how mercilessly unjust you are.’

‘No; you would promise what you could not fulfil. Every year, every day our relations would grow more familiar to you, and so less

powerful to hold or satisfy you. Every year, every day you would remember with more bitterness all that you have given up in sacrificing your good name and your position in your own country. Your country is intolerable to you; you hate its weather, its society, its politics, its hypocrisies, and its climate; but yet, having given it up, you sigh for it. As it is with your country, so is it with your wife. You do not care for her—you will never care for her. But she represents something which you have lost by your own act, and so you fret for her.'

Where he stood beside her in the moonlight his face flushed painfully.

'It is not that. It is not what you think,' he said with agitation. 'You know well I have no feeling for her of that sort. But I know that she lives in suffering, possibly even in temptation, and I cannot forget that when I married her I swore to her father that I would make her happiness as far as a man can make a woman's. Of course those promises are made and forgotten in all marriages, people cannot keep them even if they would; but he was a man whom I honoured, and he is dead, and it

seems vile to have been false to him. That is all the regret that I feel, that I have felt. I do not think it is a feeling which, if you could wholly understand it, you would despise.'

'I do not despise it. But I do not see why it comes to you so late.'

He was silent.

He knew well enough that yonder on the sea the night that he had been bidden by her to make and abide by his choice, he had resolved to choose the sacrifice of his happiness rather than of his word, but that the anger which his wife's unbidden presence had aroused in him, and the impetuosity of his emotions, had hurried him into the choice which had appeared to his companion to be wholly voluntary and dispassionately meditated. But he could not say this to her; and, after all, he knew that his conscience had not spoken to him until in the streets of Venice he had heard the jest about his cousin's visit to Christslea.

'But I adore you, I adore you! I could not bear my life without you!' he cried, as he kissed the silvery furs of her mantle.

'Oh yes, you will bear it,' she said with a smile which was half sad, half scornful. 'You

love me as much as you can love, but it is not very profoundly. And I am quite sure that you will love many after me. The only woman you will never love is your wife. Of that I am satisfied. But you will go back to her. You will place yourself right in the world's eyes. I dare say you will have many children, like the virtuous prince in the fairy-tales, and you will never see me in the world without a sigh. It will be your contribution to the past, and you will imagine that you are wretched because you have lost me; it will even serve you, perhaps, as a *pose* to interest other women !'

He rose to his feet, stung and wounded beyond words.

There was germ enough of truth in the cruel words to hurt him more profoundly than any accusation wholly unjust, and yet there was injustice enough in them to rouse an agony of indignation in his heart.

'Have I deserved this from you?' he said with hot tears standing in his eyes. 'Have I ever given you right or cause to say such things of me? Once, indeed, I sinned against you, I offended you. I have done my best to atone

for that. Which of us is it now who first speaks of severance and of disillusion? Which of us is it now who finds our relations insufficient and monotonous? You are unjust to me—cruelly, barbarously unjust. I have told you the truth of my own feelings as I analyse and find them. If my candour wrongs me in your sight I cannot help it. If a man and a woman, after years of intimacy, cannot speak the truth to one another, who can? The remorse that I feel for my own failure to pledges which I voluntarily took has nothing to do with my devotion to you. I am neither a great man nor a good one, but such as I am I have given you all my life. I ask nothing of you or of fate but to be allowed to so give it ever.’

The tears which had dimmed his eyes rolled down his cheeks. He felt passionately and profoundly; and he felt also his own utter impatience to persuade her that he did so.

She looked at him with the tender but tranquil gaze of a woman who has loved but loves no more.

‘Whilst I could and did believe that I loved you greatly, I had the right to take

your life to mine. Now that I do not believe that, now that I look in my own heart and feel that in much it has ceased to respond to yours, I have no longer such a right. I am bound to restore you to your world, to your freedom, to your friends.'

'And you think that my life is to be thrown aside like that as if it were a mere toy of which you had tired!'

'I have never treated it as a toy, nor ever treated it lightly, though once you treated mine so. You are unhappy, and you will be unhappy—for a time. But you will be reconciled to yourself, to your society, and to your wife. Our position is one in which there can be the most perfect happiness, whatever moralists may say, so long as there is perfect love. But so long only; and that is not between us now, though there are the memories of it. They must be sacred enough to preserve us from all recrimination, from all enmity.'

The silence which followed on her words was filled only by the voice of the sea.

The splendour of the night was around them, and in its stillness there arose the song

of an early-singing nightingale, breaking its heart in the orange grove. He gave a gesture of despair and cast himself once more at her feet.

‘I cannot live without you ! I cannot—I cannot !’

She stooped and kissed him fondly, and with lingering touch upon his brow and hair.

‘Yes, you can ; and you will. Do not wait to feel our affection decay and dwindle by inches day by day. Let us part while we still care enough to part in tenderness. So, dear—good-night.’

CHAPTER LVII.

A FEW nights later Aubrey walked home from Westminster after a tedious debate ; a weary waste of breath and speech serving no purpose but to bewilder brains already dull enough, and deafen a country already only too obtuse. He was fatigued, and was glad to breathe even the close air of London streets after those many hours of suffocating and useless verbiage.

His thoughts went, as they did ever in his lonely moments, to Gladys. Was she sleeping and dreaming, forgetful of her sorrows? Or was she sleepless and dreamless in that little chamber under the apple-boughs, within the sound of the sea. When he entered the great gates of Balfrons House it was almost daybreak ; he went to his writing-room as usual to glance at any letters or despatches which might have come during the evening. There were several ; but prominent to his eyes amongst them was a

large envelope bearing the post-mark of Paris and addressed to him by Guilderoy.

‘The only woman whom I love has dismissed me,’ said this strange message. ‘I am free with such poor freedom as can be enjoyed by one who will for ever drag behind him the weight of an unchangeable regret. I shall never love the innocent woman whom I have married; but I will, if she accepts such reparation, do my duty by her. I cannot, I dare not promise more. I have been false, often involuntarily, to all my past promises save one hitherto; but to this promise which I now offer I will be faithful if her indulgence is extended to me and her affections can be satisfied with respect. I send my letter to her through you, first because I know that you have more influence over her than any one; and, in the second place, because I owe you amends for the insult and the suspicion which I passed upon you. I can give you no better proof of my conviction that both were undeserved by you than by sending through you this offer of my future to her. I trust to your loyalty and your honour in confiding such a mission to them, and can think of no better way

to prove to you that I am confident you are her best friend and my most faithful adviser. You used harsh and bitter words to me when we last met ; but they were such as I esteem you for, and if severe they were deserved. I have had too much vanity and too much success in life and in love ; I have, in both, now received the most humiliating and the most indelible rebuff. I have failed to retain the heart and to satisfy the imagination of the one woman for whom I have felt a lasting or an unselfish passion. For my suffering you will care nothing, and you will say that in bringing a crippled and mortified heart to my wife I shall but offend her further. It may be so, and if she thinks so I shall not protest against her decision. But, again, you have said that she loves me still, and women who love content themselves with little. The immensity of their tenderness is wide enough to cover all shortcomings, and they are happy if they can heal any wounds, even if those wounds have been made by other women. I do not know that she has this tenderness to me ; she has always to me seemed very cold. But you have said that she has it, and has it for me. Be this as it may, she

is proud ; she may prefer to silence the tongues of the world by a reunion which shall be as real, or merely as apparent, as she pleases. There has been no publicity such as would make such reunion impossible, and the world, if we resume our former life, will soon forget that we have been separated. At all events I have thought that duty and honour, however tardily obeyed, lead me to offer my future to her. She can do with it what she pleases.'

Aubrey flung the letter on the floor in passionate anger. Its sincerity he did not doubt, but the mission it placed on him was loathsome.

'Can he not go back to her without my intervention?' he thought bitterly. 'Must he needs call on me to rejoin his broken ties? Could he find no other messenger? Could he not write to her direct by ordinary means? What title has he to put such a burden upon me? What right, in Heaven's name, to bid me carry his soul to her and beseech her to wash it white?'

He knew that Guilderoy had written to him in all honesty and well-meaning, intending to make reparation for his suspicions by an act of

perfect and even chivalrous confidence. He did justice to the motives which had dictated the letter, but he cursed the writer for its cruelty and for the task which it laid upon him. For awhile he was tempted to reject it; to send it back, with its enclosure, and say, 'I cannot be your ambassador. She is yours—go to her without preface.'

Thrice he wrote those lines, or lines similar to them; and then tore them up, dissatisfied with them as cowardice and selfishness. If he loved her as he did, should he lose any occasion of opening the gates of happiness to her? He knew that she was proud and unforgiving; that she deemed herself bound in self-respect to adhere to her choice of a lonely and self-sufficing life; he knew that Guilderoy, going to her simply because the woman whom he loved had dismissed him, would almost surely be dismissed by her with scorn and even with hatred.

Was not he, who knew this, bound to do his uttermost to stand between her and what would be to her lifelong severance from one whom she loved? to employ such means as he possessed of swaying her mind and persuading her character to bend to that forgiveness with-

out which she would be eternally wretched? to do for her in this moment of her life what her father would certainly have done had he been living now?

He was obliged in no way, indeed, to serve her or his cousin; he could let their lives drift apart as they might, and would have no need to blame himself or fear the blame of others. But that cold neutrality seemed base to him; that withdrawing of his conscience behind the pale of what was obligation, and what was not, seemed to him poor and mean; generous natures know nothing of such cautious limitations.

‘If I love thee, what is that to thee?’ he thought. Nothing indeed, but to him it was much; to him it seemed to require from him as much devotion and service as though she had been wholly his. She had trusted him, entirely and innocently trusted him; to Aubrey this gave her title to his allegiance for ever.

He took up the letter for her which had been enclosed in Guilderoy’s. It was left unsealed for him to read it. He did not read it, he could guess the contents; they must be, he knew, the same that had been said to him, softened and mitigated probably, but the same in substance.

He put it unread in the inner pocket of his coat and rang for his private secretary.

‘I must go into the country for a day,’ he said to the young man ; ‘there is nothing pressing at the House for the moment, and I shall be back to-morrow night in time for a division if there be one. See to these matters ;’ and he gave him the directions necessary for the conduct of many subjects of importance and urgency with the rapidity and clearness of explanation which becomes second nature to public men. In another hour he was in the open country, and in the midst of fields and woods bathed in pale sunshine, going towards the south-west sea-shore where the village of Christslea lay, with the swell of Atlantic rollers beating against its cliffs.

He had not seen her since the day that he had told her that he could have no mistress in any sense of love save England. He had written to her briefly from time to time; to hear of her health ; but no other intercourse had taken place between them. In his letters to her he had pleaded the stress of his Parliamentary work as the reason of his absence. She understood what the true reason

was, and did not urge him to visit her as she had been used to do. But the weeks and months had been more dreary, more intolerable to her, now that she had lost the one relief, the one solace, the one pleased expectancy of his occasional visits, and often she wished wistfully that she were lying insensible to all pain beside her father under the mossy turf.

The companionship and the correspondence of Aubrey had been to her a far greater happiness and consolation than she had known until they had almost ceased, or had at the best passed into an infrequent and restrained assurance of friendship. Often now as she walked to and fro the shore in the rough winds of the early spring weather, she felt with a feeling akin to terror that it was not Guilderoys but his cousin whom she missed, whom she thought of, whom she regretted. All that serious and tender solicitude for her, all that manly and generous devotion to her, although so carefully kept within the bounds of friendship and family relationship, had penetrated her inmost nature with its unselfishness and moved her to a gratitude which was in itself a form of affection. She had not been conscious of how great

a place he occupied in her life until the cessation of his visits to Christslea.

She began slowly to realise, as she had never realised before, what were those dangers to her of which her father had warned her in words whose meaning she could now read by the light of her own heart. Her present was a blank, and her future was one which terrified her. She began to realise also how frightful a thing was this utter loneliness to which she was self-condemned. There were moments when it was all that she could do to find strength to resist the impulse to cast herself headlong from the rocks, to seek the numbness and dumbness of death amongst those tossing waves in which her rosy feet had paddled in infancy, finding in them her merriest playfellows. It was the memory of her father which alone sustained her against the supreme temptation of isolated lives. She seemed to hear his voice saying to her in the words of the Athenian by whom a higher creed was reached than any priests ever taught, 'When death approaches, the mortal part dies, but the immortal part departs, safe and uncorrupted, having withdrawn itself from death.' Should she dare to put

out that light of the soul with her own hand?

Her father had rightly foreseen that those friends who would serve her best in the trials of her life would be those Immortals with whom he had taught her even as a child to converse.

With the approach of the tardy English spring the burden of her days grew heavier, and their solitude more unbearable in its vacancy. When all the gladness of reviving life is coming to all animate things and to the waking earth itself, all youth which is lonely and unloved feels its isolation, and its physical and spiritual desires, with more cruel sharpness than at any other period of the year. Greenness to the grass and glory to the flower can return—why not the joys of the senses and the soul?

She knew that Aubrey had said aright; that her life was barren and unblessed. Was it her own fault that it had become so? Had she lacked gentleness, sympathy, indulgence—all those unpromised gifts which love should bring unasked, and without which the bare promise of fidelity is naught. Humility had come to her, and great sadness, and contrition,

and self-censure ; she began to learn how hard it is to guard the gates of the soul from its tempters, how useless to pledge feelings which must change as the mind and the heart grow older, and demand more, ere they can be satisfied. She ceased to blame her husband in proportion as she ceased to care for him. Her love seemed to have died out of her with that violent and delirious jealousy which once had moved her so absolutely, and now seemed dead as last year's leaves.

It was a balmy and sunny afternoon when Aubrey reached Christslea. The cattle, released from their stalls, were straying at will on moor and pasture. The first fisher fleet of the spring-time was visible in the offing, red-brown sails against a silvery-blue sky. The orchards were all in blossom in a sweet confusion of rose and white. The pigeons flew above the boughs and the sea-gulls flew above the waves. It was all soft, cool, pale, and fresh ; English in its sobriety and simplicity of tint, and with the haze and the scent of the morrow's rain in the air. She was standing in the orchard when he put his hand on the latch of the gate. A joy of which she was wholly unconscious broke

over the sadness of her face like sunshine as she saw him and came towards him.

‘It is so long since you were here!’ she said, holding out both her hands to him.

He took them in his own, but did not hold them for more than a moment.

‘Yes, it is long,’ he said, with a sigh.

All that welcome and affection speaking in her face were to him as the sight of a spring of clear water to a tired wayfarer who cannot reach to drink of it.

‘Have you missed me?’ he asked, involuntarily.

A shiver passed over her as she stood in the pale sunshine.

‘Very much,’ she answered simply.

He was silent.

Then he said abruptly, ‘Let us go up on the cliff; I have something to tell you which will be best told by your father’s grave. Besides, under all these blossoms and boughs one cannot breathe.’

‘I will go where you wish,’ she said; her new-born happiness was startled and overshadowed. She had a presentiment of ill.

They walked almost in silence out of the

orchard, and across the stretch of rough grass-land which parted it from the cliff-path which Guilderoy a few months earlier had seen her ascend. It was early in the afternoon, and the silence was unbroken around them ; the air was sweet and strong, the sea calm. They crossed the head of the cliff until they reached a seat under the churchyard wall, shaded by the evergreen hedge and the yews and pines of its enclosure.

‘We will wait here,’ said Aubrey. ‘You can see the sea ; it is always your friend and counsellor.’

The graveyard, with its tall and slender marble pillar rising above the evergreen foliage and the light, silvery, shadowy wands of blossoming willows, was behind them, and before them, far below, the grey and tranquil waters of the bay.

‘I have this letter to bring to you from Evelyn,’ he said, and took out the note addressed to her and offered it to her.

As she recognised the handwriting she grew very pale, and an expression that was almost terror came into her eyes.

‘He has no right, no right whatever, to

address me,' she said, and made a gesture to refuse the letter. It fell on the turf between them.

Aubrey stooped for it and offered it to her again.

'He has every right,' he said coldly, 'and you are bound to read whatever he says to you. Do not be either obstinate or ungenerous.'

'It is you who are ungenerous to me.'

'Do not let us quarrel, my dear,' said Aubrey, in the words which Beatrice Sorìa had used to Guilderoy. 'Life is painful enough without dissension. I bid you read this letter, first because I know the contents, and know that they are such as you are bound to consider, and because, in the second place, as I have been made the bearer of it, he would think that I had betrayed my trust if you refused.'

She was silent some moments; then she took the envelope from his hand, and opened it and read what it contained.

She read it rapidly, guessing rather than perusing its sentences.

'Aubrey will tell you better than I can

write to you what it is I ask from you after these many months of silence and separation. Do not think, my dear, that I would urge for a moment any rights that the law may give me when I have morally forfeited them; and do not think that I would seek to persuade or to solicit you. I tell you frankly, the woman I love, for whom I left you, loves me no more. This avowal is the greatest proof of my sincerity and of my humility that I can give to you. I make you no grand protestations, but, if you care to do so, our life together might be renewed, with every wish on my part to make it happier for you than the past has been. Marriage is the cruellest of all mistakes, and I cannot ever regret enough that I led into its captivity your innocent and ignorant youth. I can only say that the error was made by me in all good faith, and that if I have been untrue to my promises to you and to your father I have always been so without premeditation and with self-reproach which has been more poignant than you would consent to believe. I have offended you, and I will not seek to palliate my offence by saying, as I perhaps might say with some show of self-

justification, that you did not give me either that sympathy or that indulgence which I had hoped for from you. It is enough to say now that if you care to do so I am willing to begin our lives afresh.'

The letter was manly, sincere, and plainly written from the heart ; it would have touched and won any woman who had loved him into forgiveness of faults even much graver than his had been ; but it did not touch hers because the feeling which had bound her to him was dead, and a dead thing can return neither cry nor caress. She read it. Then she threw it again on the ground.

'He comes to me because she has dismissed him !' she cried with violence, her nostrils dilated and quivering like those of a blood-mare under the spur.

'It is at least honest of him to tell you so. He could easily have affected to you that he abandoned her for your sake. Believe me, candour in a man of the world to women, and about women, is the very rarest of all qualities.'

She turned on him with passionate indignation and suffering.

‘ You defend him ; you always defend him ! Why should he choose *you* as his messenger ? Has he not hurt me enough already ? ’

Aubrey passed over the admission which was confessed in her words.

‘ He chose me because he had been unjust to me and wished to give me this mark of his confidence,’ he replied, with that self-negation which he had imposed on himself when he had accepted the mission to her. ‘ I do not defend his past conduct. He knows all that I think of it. But I am compelled in honour to say now, that I believe he desires fully to make such reparation to you as may be in his power.’

‘ Because the Duchess Sorìa has wearied of him ! ’

‘ Not only because of that. He is neither heartless nor conscienceless, and he felt bitterly months ago that he had been false to his promises to your father. I think you may believe what he says now the more fully because he makes no protest of feelings which do not move him, and which would be even an insult offered to you at this moment, however the future may renew them in both of you.’

‘They will be never renewed. *Their* love was renewed because it had once been great; but between him and me there has never been such love—never, never! A year ago it would have made me glad,’ she said wearily. ‘I should perhaps have scorned myself, as I told you that I should do, but I should have been happy. Not now. He has waited too long. What does he think I am that I should be willing to meet him after all these months?’

‘He thinks you are what you are—his wife.’

‘He set me free from that bond when he left me.’

‘Your father would not have said so.’

‘But I say so. Go you and tell him so. Why does he seek to return to me? Not out of real remorse, nor any tenderness; only because he is proud and he knows that the world blames him.’

‘You are too harsh.’

‘Truth is harsh.’

He felt a mad longing to lift her in his arms and bear her far away from all their world before his cousin could reach there to

claim her. For a moment all the soft pale sunshine seemed to him red as blood, and the beating of the sea upon the sands like the throbs of the many human hearts sounding in agonised revolt against the brutalities and the hypocrisies of social law.

‘If he had written it a year ago—six months ago—it would have made me happy. I would have forgiven all—ah! what do I say? love always forgives because it *is* love. Now I cannot forgive because I have ceased to care! Why does he come to me when it is too late? Go, tell him so. It is too late! too late!’

‘It is never too late for a woman’s mercy——’

‘Mercy! What mercy would there be in a feigned welcome? What is the body without the soul? What use to give him myself when I cannot give him my affections?’

‘You will give them again when you have seen him once more. You are dreaming of coldness and of harshness that you do not feel——’

‘I have ceased to dream long ago. I know what life is too well. Dreams are for the happy.’

‘Surely on your side——’

‘Yes; I loved him as one loves when one is very young; but it is dead in me; it is dead, dead, dead, I tell you, like any skeleton of any drowned creature that lies at the bottom of that sea!’

Aubrey turned from her, and walked to and fro upon the turf before her. The pain of the moment was almost beyond his strength, well tutored though it was.

‘You think so,’ he said after a long pause; ‘you think so because you are hurt, indignant, and even more outraged at his solicitation of forgiveness than you were by his original desertion. But this will pass away. You once loved my cousin with passion if not with wisdom; he is not a man whom women forget. When he comes to you, you will consent to what he wishes; you will pass over those eighteen months of bitterness, you will only remember that you were once devoted to him, and that he was the man who taught you the first meaning of love, and was the father of your dead children.’

‘No, no, no!’ she said with violence. ‘No—for ever no! His place is empty in my heart. There is a stone there; no warmth, no desire,

no remembrance ; only a stone, the stone which has the seal of oblivion, the stone that you set on a grave !’

She threw herself on her knees beside the wooden bench and buried her face in her hands, and sobbed with the convulsive weeping which he had seen once before.

‘ Why could I not meet you first ! *You* would have been true to me ! ’ she cried in the passion of her tears ; not knowing what she said, knowing only that a great nature was wasted on her in vain, without joy to itself or gladness to her.

Aubrey sighed ; his features changed and his eyes filled with an unspeakable yearning.

He saw that her heart in its indignation, its solitude, its want of sympathy, and its recognition of sympathy, both of feeling and of temperament, in him, turned towards him instinctively as a beaten child turns to those who will soothe and caress it. He saw that with but little effort he could detach her from what still remained in her of love for his cousin, and lead her humiliated and lonely soul to his, there to find comfort if not joy. He knew that he had in him the power to console her, the heart

which could alone meet and content her own ; but he knew, too, that it rested with him to awake her to this knowledge or to let it slumber in her unaroused for ever. He had never before deemed it possible. He had been wholly sincere when he had told his cousin that she cared nothing for himself. But in this moment, in her whole attitude, in the tears she wept, in the broken words she muttered, he realised that it would not be a task beyond his powers to make her see in him more than a friend, to lead her from gratitude to other and warmer emotions, to suggest to her that the greatest chastisement which a woman can take upon a faithless love is to find and make her life's happiness without it. For a moment all his heart and all his senses made the temptation more than he had strength to bear ; but with an instant's meditation he found force to resist.

‘I should not have loved you in that way, my dear,’ he said, with a lie which was more heroic than any truth. ‘Long ago I loved one woman madly, and she was false to me. I would have told you my story before now, but I never thought that you would care to hear it. I gave to her all that a man can give, and she

rewarded me by the lowest of intrigues, the foulest of infidelities. I was very young when she robbed my life of all its colour and warmth, and left me only such cold consolation as may lie in the pursuit of public duties. But she closed my heart to passion for ever. I can feel affection and devotion—I feel them both for you—but nothing beyond those. Do not think of me ever as a lover for any living woman. The only mistress I shall ever have, in any sense of love, is England.’

His voice was low and grave, and infinitely tender ; his declaration was an untruth, but it was nobler than all truth.

‘Even were it otherwise with me,’ he said wearily, ‘I could not, I would not, risk the accusation from my cousin and the world that I had abused his trust in me, that I had taken advantage of his absence and your loneliness. I may mistake, and think that honour in me which is only selfishness ; but this is what I feel and what would guide me if—if—you were still dearer to me than you are.’

He paused, and his deep and laboured breathing sounded painfully upon the country silence round them.

‘And if,’ he added, ‘if I be so urgent with you to receive Guilderoy and reunite your life to his, it is because I feel that in the earliest years of our acquaintance I perhaps did wrong in enlisting your confidence and giving you my sympathy. I often now blame myself; I perhaps helped to alienate you from him. I perhaps turned towards myself sympathies and confidences which, had I not been there, might have found their way in time to him. I ask you, dear, to take this remorse from me. He has many lovable qualities; he has many high talents; he feels sincerely towards you, if not warmly; you may make his future such as his boyhood promised, if you care for him.’

‘But I do *not* care!’

She rose to her feet; her features were stern and scornful, her eyes were full of passionate feeling burning through their tears; he seemed to her as cruel as Guilderoy had been, as the world had been, as life had been; caring nothing for her, and her pain, and her fate; caring only for the world’s opinion and a man’s egotism, and the mere pride of race.

‘Then I have more remorse than I thought, or than I have strength to bear,’ he said, as his

eyes met hers for one moment in that regard which strips bare the heart and unveils the inmost soul.

Without another word, or any sign even of farewell, he turned away from her and went with rapid steps across the grassland and down the pathway of the cliff.

She stood motionless and looked after him, her eyes wistfully searching the vacant air long after he had passed from sight.

The spring night was cold and the dews falling heavily when she left the place where her father lay, and returned with slow and tired steps to the house.

She had her husband's letter in her hand. When she reached her chamber, she read it again and again, trying to awake with it one chord of the music which was silent in her soul.

Life seemed to her hard, conventional, artificial, hateful.

One man left her because his honour was dearer to him than she was; and one man returned to her because he was uneasy whilst the world thought ill of him.

What was the worth of love or friend-

ship if they quailed before the opinion of others?

What use were the beauty, and the heart, and the mind of a woman if they could inspire nothing more than that?

She passed the hours of the night walking to and fro that narrow bedchamber where she had slept as a child, hearing the hoarse notes of the village clock record the dreary passing of the time.

CHAPTER LVIII.

THAT night Guilderoy was in his house in Paris, the prey to many conflicting feelings which banished the carelessness and ease with which his nature had hitherto met the complexities of human life.

He was not sure whether he most wished or most feared his wife's acceptance of his offer. He had been entirely honest in all that he had written to her and to his cousin ; but he dreaded the results of it with that shrinking from all pain and all obligation which had always been so strong in him.

He could not dismiss the anxiety which governed him ; he could not eat or sleep, or seek his usual distractions in this city which was so familiar and so pleasant to him ; he was restless under the sense which haunted him of the inevitable scorn with which Aubrey would regard his vacillations and his confidence, and

he already repented the impulse which had made him select his cousin as his intercessor.

He wished that he had gone himself without any preparation or mediation to Christ'slea as the day and the night wore onward, and each succeeding hour might bring him a message from Aubrey.

His heart ached for the first time in his life under a wound which could not be closed or stilled by any anodyne of pleasure. The humiliation with which the dismissal of the woman he loved had filled him would not pass away for many a year; perhaps never.

He was conscious that she had weighed him in the scales of her fine intelligence and found him wanting; he knew that he had failed to respond to her imagination; he knew, too, that what she had ceased to give to him she might give to others. He had been weary, dissatisfied, and haunted by remorse when with her, but without her his existence was a blank and his soul torn by a vague but intolerable jealousy.

He who had never before known that passion which is the companion of unhappy love was now, if it be possible to be so, jealous at once of two women whose affections he had possessed

utterly, and yet whom he had both, through his own inconstancy and vacillation, lost ; and for the first time in his whole life neither his careless philosophy nor his swiftly-changing caprices could solace him or build up anew the cloud-palace of amorous content. He was dissatisfied with himself. All that was best and most spiritual in him condemned him in his own eyes. He could have defended his conduct easily to others, but he could not defend it to himself.

It was dawn in the streets of Paris, and birds were twittering in the lime-trees beneath his window when his servant brought him the telegram he was expecting from his cousin.

He tore it open nervously.

‘I have done what you asked,’ said Aubrey in it. ‘I have no mandate from her, but I believe it will be as you wish. Go yourself.’

Was he glad or not ? He could not tell. He was conscious of a weight of duties and obligations which rolled back like a stone over his life ; but he was also conscious of that relief which comes from a choice finally resolved and a conscience quieted and appeased. Amidst all the chaos of his thoughts he was touched to admiration of Aubrey’s generosity and

loyalty. Not one man in ten millions would have accepted such a task, or, accepting it, would have executed it to the end with perfect self-abnegation. He could not have reached such stoical nobility himself; but he recognised the greatness of it.

‘I shall go to England this morning,’ he said to his people; and as he spoke the door of his room opened and his sister entered. She had arrived that moment in Paris, and had come there without changing her clothes, taking an hour’s sleep, or even breaking her fast.

He saw her with displeasure. They had not met since the late summer which had followed John Vernon’s death; and the remembrance of her letters which he had read in Venice was fresh and hateful in him.

She seemed ever to him like a bird of evil omen watching and waiting till the corpse of some dead human happiness fell to her. And yet she was what the world called a good woman—pious, chaste, virtuous, and wise.

‘Why are you here?’ he said with impatience and discourtesy, making no affectation of a welcome which he could not give or of a pleasure which he could not feel.

‘Is that all the greeting you give me after all these months?’

‘I cannot pretend what I do not feel,’ he said irritably. ‘I am sure that you would not come to me thus, unannounced, unsummoned, unless you had some bad news to bring or some cruel suspicion to suggest.’

‘You are unjust’—her voice was broken, her lips quivered; she was tired, cold, and unnerved; in her own way she loved him, and she felt that even such affection as he had ever felt for her was gone.

‘I am not unjust,’ he answered coldly. ‘You have never ceased to irritate and alienate me. You mean well, perhaps, but if you have the intentions of a saint, you have the insinuations of a fiend. I received all your letters in Italy. I never answered them because they offended and disgusted me. You always hated my wife. You recognised the fineness of her nature, but you never ceased to be pitiless to her. I do not know it; but, I am as certain as that we stand here, that it was you who informed her of my relations, before my marriage, with the only woman I ever loved.’

‘I thought it right that she should know of

them,' replied his sister, who was never without courage. 'And those same relations renewed after marriage have been made public to every one by yourself.'

'What is that to you?' said Guilderoy, white with ill-controlled passion. 'You are not my keeper. It is nothing to you what I do. You are a good woman—oh yes!—and you make your virtues into a sheaf of poisoned arrows with which you slay the lives of others. What did you write—what did you dare to write—to me in Venice and elsewhere? You slandered Aubrey, whom the whole country respects; you slandered my wife, whose first and staunchest friend you ought to have been; and you insinuated to me suspicions which might very easily, had I been either more credulous or more hot-tempered, have ended in bloodshed between my cousin and myself, or at the best in a public quarrel which would have disgraced us both. That is what you call goodness, sincerity, affection! God deliver me from them and send me sinners; sinners of every sin under heaven, but with sympathy in them and generosity and mercy!'

She was silent for a moment. She had

never seen him so fully roused, so reckless in denunciation ; she loved him greatly, and she felt in every word the severance one by one of the ties of consanguinity and habit which had bound them together.

But she was a woman who was pitiless in pursuit of her purpose ; unchangeable in her opinions and her conduct, unrelenting in her tyranny and curiosity and meddlesome inquisition into the lives and thoughts of others.

‘I pass over your insults and your ingratitude,’ she said, with difficulty controlling the rage she felt. ‘I wish only to ask you one question. I have come from England to ask it. I heard by chance that you were in Paris. Is it true that you intend to effect a reconciliation with your wife ?’

‘Who told you that I do so ?’

‘No one told me. But I have heard its possibility discussed, vaguely, in society.’

‘Well ? What then ?’

‘You cannot mean it ? You could not drag your name in the dust ? Your severance from her was bad enough ; but your reconciliation to her would be worse, ten million times worse. It is not to be thought of, not to be dreamed

of, for one instant ! You owe it to your whole family !’

‘ What do I owe to my family ? ’

He had grown quite calm ; his violence had spent itself, but she, who had known him from his earliest years, knew that this tranquillity had more real menace and sterner meaning in it.

But she had never quailed before the fury of any of the men related to her whom she had tortured, fatigued, and injured for their good, as their good was seen by her.

‘ You owe it to your family,’ she replied, ‘ to your family and to yourself, not to take again into your life before the world a woman who has lived as your wife has done in your absence.’

‘ How has she lived ? ’

‘ How ? As no woman in her senses could have lived. Withdrawn from every one ; herself a mark for the most odious suspicions, receiving no visits save from one man whose name already had often been connected with hers. You used to be proud, you used to care beyond all things for your name—what will the whole world say of you if, after more than a year and a half of such a life as that, Lady

Guilderoy is once more admitted into your houses and your heart?’

Guilderoy looked at her; and, bold woman though she was, she was afraid of the effects of her words.

He smiled slightly; his smile was very bitter and very contemptuous.

‘If you only came here to say this,’ he said, ‘it was a pity you did not remain in England. I should then at least have been able to forget all that you wrote to me in Italy. You are a virtuous woman, but you are a cruel woman. If you had any mercy in you, you would have been stirred to compassion for Gladys; you would have gone to her, you would have counselled her, you would have set the shield of your unblemished position between the world and her. Even if you had hated her, still you should have done so for my sake. Aubrey alone did what he could. I am grateful to him. Whoever hints a word against him is my enemy. The mistake made by Gladys was the mistake of an imaginative, unworldly, and over-sensitive nature; but it was a noble mistake—one which none but an ignoble nature could possibly misjudge. I am blamable in

much, but I am not utterly vile. I offended her, and, if life permits it to me, I will atone to her. It never occurred to me as possible that the world could blame her for my fault. Possibly it would never have dared to do so had not you been the first to cast a stone at her.'

'Are you the dupe of your wife as you have been of others?'

'I am no one's dupe, except my own sometimes. And now you will pardon me if I leave you. The house of course is yours to stay in if you choose. But I am about to leave for England, and you will pardon me if I say that I wish to go alone. Short as the journey is, it would be too long for me to make it in the society of one who is the unkindest enemy of myself and of those who are dear to me.'

'What! Does the devotion of a lifetime count for nothing? Are those dear to you whom you forsook, and by whom you have been betrayed? Do you utterly forget all my affection, all my forgiveness, all my defence of your errors in the world, for sake of a woman whom you are tired of one day and idealise the next, only because she no longer cares what you do?'

‘My good sister,’ said Guilderoy, with something of his old manner, ‘I told you long ago that you were equally discontented with me whether I took the paths of vice or the paths of virtue, to use the jargon of the world’s very arbitrary and rather senseless classifications. You were indignant when I left my wife. You are indignant now that it is possible I may return to her. I do not see that in either case you have any title to be my judge ; and I regret to feel that you have forfeited the power to be my friend.’

With that he left her ; and she, mortified, worsted, and made impotent as an arbiter of fate, broke down into a fit of womanlike and heartbroken weeping.

She recalled the voice of John Vernon saying in the summer stillness of his garden, ‘Be kind to her.’ She knew that she had been more than not kind ; that she had been cruel, that she had deserted her, injured her, and been the first to lead the world to see harm and disgrace in the solitude of that simple life at Christslea. Fool that she had been to let her prejudice and jealousy warp her judgment so utterly ! Fool that she had been not to have

had sense and penetration enough to foresee that the time would come when her brother would resent as a dishonour done to himself all slur and suspicion cast through her upon the innocence of his wife!

Her pride at last realised that she had no influence over those she strove to move; no wisdom in her interference, no place in the hearts of those she loved; she saw at last her own soul as it truly was, with curiosity in the guise of friendship, harshness in the mask of justice, meddlesome and vexatious authority in the form of affection, unconscious jealousy and malignity in the golden robes of virtue.

CHAPTER LIX.

A WHOLE day and yet another sleepless night had passed with Gladys in that wretchedness of uncertainty in which the soul is like a house divided against itself. All that was noblest in her urged her to do what Aubrey had begged of her ; all that was human, weak, passionate and selfish refused to do it.

She understood why marriage, which is so burdensome and so unrecompensed to the man, is to the woman so great an emancipation and enrichment. Yet were she only free now—only a child as she had been when Guilderoy had found her on the moors ! And she remembered bitterly that, even if she were so, the world would only see in her feeling for Aubrey ambition and acquisitiveness, as it had seen it in her marriage ; and the voice of her father seemed to rebuke her, saying, as he had often said, in the words of Socrates to Crito, ‘ Is it

worth while to think so much of the opinion of others ? ’

No, it was not worth while ; all the natural nobility of her nature recognised the nobility of Aubrey’s words and acts ; but, womanlike, their austerity, commanding her admiration, left her heart cold ; womanlike, she would have fain had him think less of his honour, more of her. An infinite regret, which she knew would abide with her so long as ever she should have life, weighed on her for the pain which she had brought on him through her unthinking acceptance of his devotion and her too selfish appeals to him. And yet it seemed to her that after all he loved her but little ! Women can never accept or understand the feeling which places honour before themselves. It only hurts them.

With the contradiction of human wishes, the simple secluded life of Christslea, which had seemed hardly better than a living death, grew dear to her. The even and monotonous time, the empty house, the homely ways, seemed safe and peaceful. Beside the troubled course of passions, of pleasures, and of pains which make up the life of the world, her residence in this little seaside hamlet ap-

peared serene and secure as the haven of a religious house appeared to those who, after the deceptions of love and the temptations of power, withdrew themselves to Port Royal or La Trappe. Its dreariness, its vacancy, the despair before it which had often seized her in its long moonless winter nights, when the silence of snow was all around, and in its grey melancholy summer evenings, when the hoot of the owl alone answered the lapping of the waves, all these passed away from her mind; she only remembered that here she had known that freedom from fresh and poignant pangs which seemed to her the nearest approach to happiness that fate would ever give to her.

She shrank from all which return to her life with her husband must mean for her. She was wholly honest; and, accepting what he offered, she knew that she must fulfil all her obligations to him. Some women might have made a feint of forgiveness only to acquire the means to wound, to irritate, to chastise, to mortify him; but any such treachery as that was impossible to the daughter of John Vernon. Returning to her life at Ladysrood must, she knew, mean for her the reassumption of all

those ties from which she had for nearly two years looked upon herself as freed.

She could do nothing meanly. As her severance from him had been complete and uncompromising, so she knew that her reunion with him must be entire, and her acceptance of him faithful in the spirit as well as in the letter. Only a year ago it would have made her so happy to have given that which he sought! Though she had scorned the suggestion of reconciliation with her lips, she had often yearned for it in her heart; but now—now it was too late to give her any possible joy; she shrank from its necessity with both her body and her mind.

‘What am I to do? What shall I choose?’ she asked herself, with passionate anxiety to make the choice which should be right in her father’s sight and Aubrey’s. The one was dead, the other absent; but both seemed very close to her through all these hours, both seemed at once her counsellors and her judges.

At times she remembered Guilderoy as he had been in the first weeks of their life together, and then a shudder passed over her, thinking that all those ecstasies, those adorations, those

entreaties lavished on her then, had all been given since to others ; and at such moments the quiet chamber, the unbroken solitude of this little cottage seemed to her the ‘haven under the hill,’ like that which sheltered the storm-tossed fisher-boats of Christslea where the cliffs curved inward facing the setting sun.

She passed the chief portion of the day pacing to and fro under the willows and yews where the marble column said of him whose mortal frame lay underneath it, shut within the earth, that death comes kindly to those by whom death has never been desired. The swallows flew in and out of the quiet place, building their nests in the eaves and gables of the church. The soft pale sunbeams fell through the dark shadows of the yew-trees and the grey plumes of the willows. Now and then some cry of a fisherman to another from the shore came faintly on the air ; and the broad white wing of a curlew brushed the topmost boughs of the churchyard trees. When she left her father’s grave it was again evening ; calm and colourless and sad as English evenings are, it seemed like the reflection of her own soul. Her choice was made.

It was late in the afternoon of the third day when she entered the woods of Ladysrood.

They were in all the delicate and lovely greenery of their first foliage. The bracken and ferns were waving breast high, and the birds were singing in the brushwood of the undergrowth and in the branches of elm, oak, and beech. The ground was blue in many a nook with pimpernel and the wild hyacinth. Across the grassy drives ever and again a deer bounded or a hare scudded. He had never cared for sport as other men care, and his woods and forests were for the most part the peaceful haunts of unmolested woodland creatures. She thought dreamily of the old story of Griseldis; had Griseldis, when her triumph came, lost the love out of her heart which had borne her through all her trials? Had she, when bidden to return to her kingdom, lost all wish for it, and only felt the heaviness of the burden she was summoned to take up, the weight and imprisonment of the reunion?

Likely enough; likely enough that Griseldis had been a happier woman in her misery, when hope and love had still been with her, than in her return to her palace and her pomp.

She passed through all the sunshine and stillness and fragrance of the dewy glades, and entered those great gardens of the south-west, in which the rose-walk was where her father had bade her have patience, and Aubrey had said the same words to her : words which had seemed to her then so cold, so commonplace, so barren.

She saw the stately evergreen avenue, the long aisles of the berceaux, the wide stone flights of the terrace steps, and the western front of the house, its buttresses and casements hung and garlanded with pink and golden banksia in full flower ; and for a little while she could not see them for the tears which blinded her eyes. There her father had stood with her in the summer night and had said to her :

‘ It lies with you to retain three angels which stand about the throne of life—honour, unselfishness, and sympathy.’

The men at work as she passed and the two servants who were idling on the terraces recognised her, and saluted her humbly, and were startled and afraid to see her there.

She bade them send the housekeeper to her.

‘ My lord returns to-morrow. Prepare every-

thing,' she said briefly. The old woman kissed her hand and murmured trembling, 'The Lord be thanked!'

Gladys looked at her with a strange look. 'Will it be well or ill?' she thought, and said no more; but entered the house where she was mistress, and uncovered her head, and sat down by one of the windows, and gazed out at the gardens smiling in the western sun. An infinite peace seemed to lie like a benediction on the great house in its silence and fragrance and majesty. But there was no peace in her heart.

'My father will be content, if he knows,' she thought.

She could not think of his soul as dead, as ignorant or as careless of her fate.

She rose after awhile and went up the staircase to her own apartments, Kenneth and the other dogs following her with soft noiseless tread; they knew the place again, but the change to it troubled them. She let the women take off her the rough serge gown she wore, symbol of the freedom and the solitude she relinquished, and clothe her in one of the many gowns which she had left there; a gown of pale grey velvet,

embroidered with silver threads, with old laces at the throat and arms. As she looked at the worn folds of the serge skirt, with all its stains of sea-sand and of wet grasses, she sighed as Griseldis may have done, despite all, when she put off her peasant's kirtle for the regal robe once more.

With the old worn gown she put away from her for ever liberty of the affections, liberty of the actions, liberty even of the thoughts; for she was very loyal, and giving herself once more she gave her undivided allegiance.

She clasped a necklace about her throat, a necklace of old Venetian gold-work which he had given her in the early days of their stay in Venice, and turned from the mirror feeling as though a score of years had gone since she had last stood before it there. Then she descended the stairs, where the afternoon sun still streamed through the painted windows across the broad steps and the oaken balustrade.

She went slowly, feeling as though she dragged a dead body with her; the amber glow of the late afternoon shining on the silvery softness of the velvet and the gold chainwork of the necklace as she moved. The house was

flooded with that rich light, that evening splendour, that fragrance from blossoming gardens and from dewy woodlands ; it seemed to make a festival with its beauty and its odours and its colour for her as she moved.

But her face was white, her step was reluctant, her heart sick. For she knew that he was on his way thither, and would soon rejoin her. Even her return to Ladysrood would be attributed by the world to coarse and selfish reasons ; and the remembrance of that imputation of low motives which the world is sure to cast on high emotions, must ever be to the nature which is above the herd a loathsome and galling remembrance.

She looked at a portrait by Watts of Aubrey which hung in the picture-gallery. It seemed to gaze at her with eyes which had life in them, and its lips seemed to utter an eternal farewell. They would meet as friends and relatives ; they would meet perforce and continually, but the old sweet intimacy was over for ever.

It left an immense loss, an immense void, in her life which she had no belief that the future could ever fill.

She wandered through the long succession of rooms and galleries, and halls and corridors ; the places were all so familiar, yet so strange to her ; like the dogs, she was troubled by a divided sense of exile and of return ; after the little lowly chambers and lonely shores of Christslea, Ladysrood seemed a palace for a queen. Her husband had given it all to her ; he had found her poor and obscure and had enriched her with all he possessed. She had never cared for these things indeed in any vulgar or avaricious sense, but absence from them had taught her to measure their value in the eyes of others, and to understand why her father, least worldly of all men, had said to her that the greatness of Guilderoy's gifts demanded from her gratitude and fealty.

She entered the drawing-rooms of the western wing, where the last glow of the sunset was lighting up with crimson reflections all the beauty and luxury of the apartments.

She walked to and fro them in their solitude, bidding the servants leave the windows open to the evening air, which came in cool and damp and full of the fragrance of spring flowers and spring woodlands.

It was the last breath of the life which she had given up and left for ever.

Henceforward she would live in the world, for the world, of the world; Guilderoy, she knew, would never lead any other existence; the burden of its artificiality, the cruelty of its crowds, the sameness of its pleasures, seemed to weigh on her already with that monotony and that irritation which she had always found in them.

The hours passed on; the day altered into night; the servants came and lighted all the waxlights in the sconces and chandeliers of the suite of rooms. She stood by one of the still open windows looking out at the shadows of the west garden, listening to the peaceful splashing of the fountains falling in the fishponds under the trees.

She could hear her own heart beat in the stillness. She knew that he had returned, and must soon come to her.

Tenderness and bitterness strove together in her soul; she remembered her father's words spoken in that chamber, and she acknowledged their nobility and beauty; but she also remembered the words with which Guilderoy

had there declared to her that he had never loved her and loved another woman.

‘Why drag the chain between us when it is pain to both?’ she thought; and her memory went to Aubrey.

The evening became night; the curfew-bell which was still rung at Ladysrood tolled from the clock-tower, the air grew colder and had the sweet breath of a million of primroses and hyacinths in it.

In the stillness and sweetness of it, Guilderoy stood before her. He looked older, paler, more weary than he had done when he had left her there eighteen months before; he had suffered both in his passions and in his pride; he had judged himself, and the world had judged him, and the woman he loved had judged him, and he and they had alike condemned him. Would this other woman whom he did not love, but in whose hands the conventional honour of his name was placed by the conventional laws of the world, condemn him also? She looked at him and made no gesture or movement which could assist him; her face was cold, and her eyes were passionless.

He crossed the room and kissed her hand

with his accustomed grace and with a ceremonious and serious courtesy.

His lips were as cold as the hand which they touched.

‘I thank you,’ he said simply. The words cost him much to utter ; he felt the unresponding and fixed gaze of her eyes upon him, and the warmer impulses, the more tender repentance, with which he had entered her presence froze under them.

‘You have nothing to thank me for,’ she said coldly. ‘You have asked me to return to you for the world’s sake, and for the world’s sake I have accepted.’

‘Only for that?’ he said, with hesitation, perplexed and troubled.

‘For that, and for my promise to my father. I said that I would never bring evil repute upon his name and yours, and I will not.’

‘But have you no other feeling? None for me?’ the words escaped him almost unconsciously, and there was an accent of emotion, almost of entreaty in them.

‘No ; none now.’

The answer was sad and immutable as death.

His face flushed as he heard it.

‘Had you ever any?’ he asked her.

‘Oh yes;’ she sighed as she spoke, and her eyes softened and darkened with many memories. ‘I loved you greatly, I have suffered greatly; but I do not love you now, nor have you power to pain me. I was a child when I loved you; I am a woman now. I will be honest with you. I do not care, I shall never care; but I will be to you what you wish; and the world—the world of which he and you think so much!—shall never know that it is so, and your honour shall be as dear to me as though you were dear.’

He heard her with profound humiliation, with unspeakable pain. He had believed her cold, but he had thought that, so far as she had loved at all, her heart had been always with him. He had come to her in repentance, in wistful desire for peace, in a vague hope of he knew not what new kind of happiness; and he found the chambers of her soul closed to him, and occupied possibly, by another.

He had nerved himself to bend to what was an act of humiliation and supplication; and, unknown to himself, he had looked in

return for the tenderness and sweetness of reconciliation, even of welcome.

‘I know,’ he murmured wearily, ‘that my offences against you have been many and great.’

‘It is not that. I have learned to know that they were natural enough. I was nothing to you ; others were much. In the beginning I did not understand you ; I did not know anything of men’s natures or of their passions. I must have fatigued you, been insufficient for you ; that I can understand. My father always told me I was to blame, that I had not indulgence.’

‘Your father was merciful as a god always and to all. He would tell you to be indulgent now.’

‘Yes ; I know that he would. I know that he would condemn me more than he would you.’

He gazed at her in silence ; she was still so young that even suffering had had no power to mar her great personal beauty ; her face was colourless and calm, her eyes full of unspeakable sadness, her attitude unconsciously one of dignity and rebuke. Vaguely he felt that it was possible he should some day love

this woman hopelessly since she no more loved him.

‘If you have ceased to care for me,’ he said almost inaudibly, ‘I cannot complain; I have only caused you suffering and mortification. I have told you that I will endeavour to atone in the future; but there is no reason why you should believe me.’

‘I believe that you mean it now.’

‘But you have no faith in my constancy of purpose? Why should you have any? Yet I am sincere.’

Her eyes rested on him musingly, and softened as they gazed.

‘I do believe you, but I cannot give you the welcome you wished,’ she said wearily. ‘I cannot, I cannot lie. If you had come back to me a year ago I should have rejoiced; I loved you then—ah! why can I not now? Where is it all gone? Why did you leave me alone?’

‘You were not alone! You had Aubrey! And what you deny to me you gave to him!’

She shrank from the name as if he had stabbed her with it.

‘That is ungenerous,’ she murmured. ‘He

has been loyalty itself to you ; only a day ago he pleaded for you with all his might and blamed me ; neither my life nor yours is worth one hour of his ! ’

Violent words rose to Guilderoy’s lips, but he repressed them with great effort ; the justice and the generosity which were in his nature beneath all the egotism of long self-indulgence conquered the passion of jealousy and of offence which stirred his life to its very centre. After all, what right had he to blame or to judge ? What title had he left to speak of his right to her affections ?

‘The fault of all is mine,’ he said with great emotion. ‘I left you in a position of the greatest peril : if you had injured me in any way I should but have had what I merited. If you love me no more, if you love a greater and a better man, how dare I blame you ? I, who so soon ceased to love you ! My poor child, believe me at least in this—from my heart I beseech you to pardon me the mad caprice in which I bound your fate to mine. I thought that you would be content, like so many women, with all the material pleasures of the world or of rank and of wealth ; I forgot that you were

your father's daughter, and that those could have no power to console you when your heart was seared and your pride was wounded. Forgive me, dear !'

He knelt at her feet as he spoke, and he kissed the hem of her skirts. She passed her hand over his hair with the same gesture, half of tenderness, half of pity, which Beatrice Sorìa had used.

A sigh which came from her soul's depths breathed over him where he knelt.

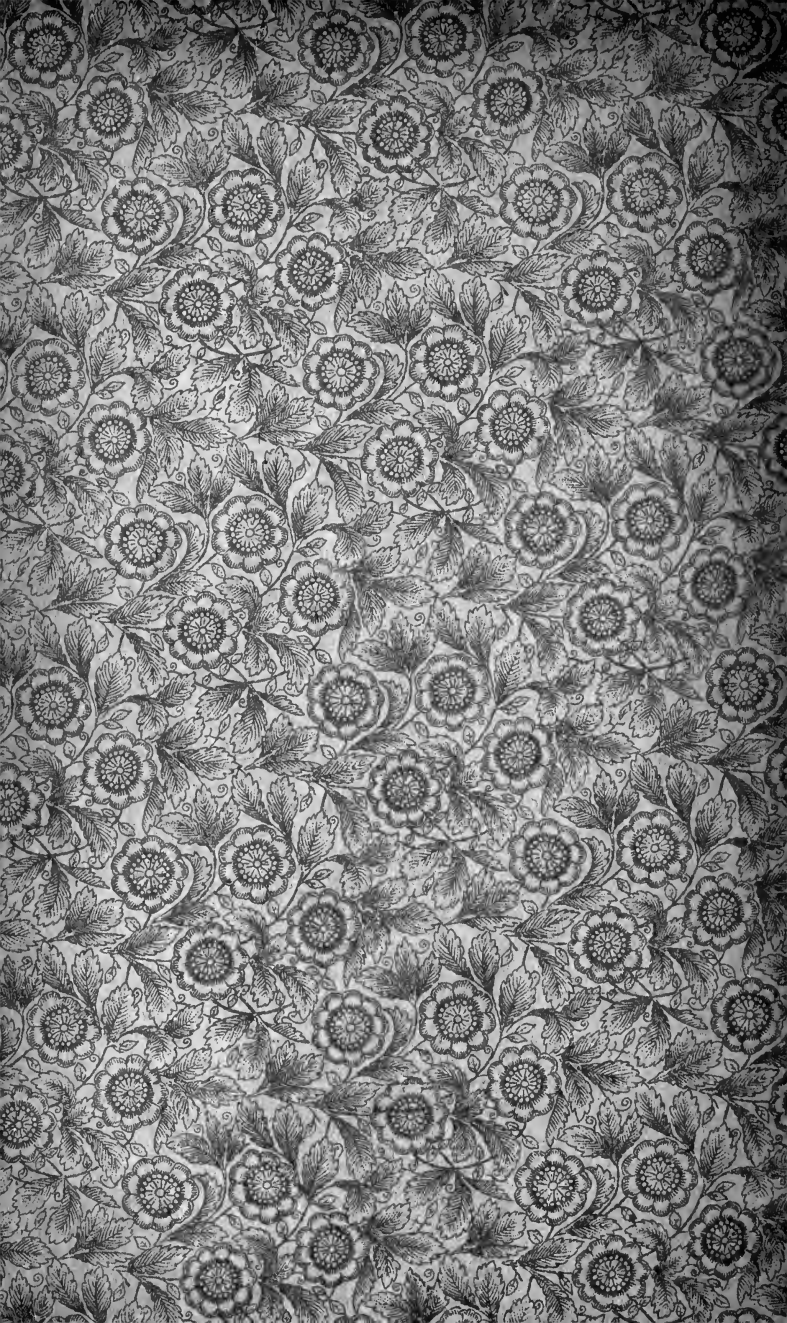
'I forgive you, I hope, and you must forgive me,' she said gently. 'Do not ask more of me yet.'

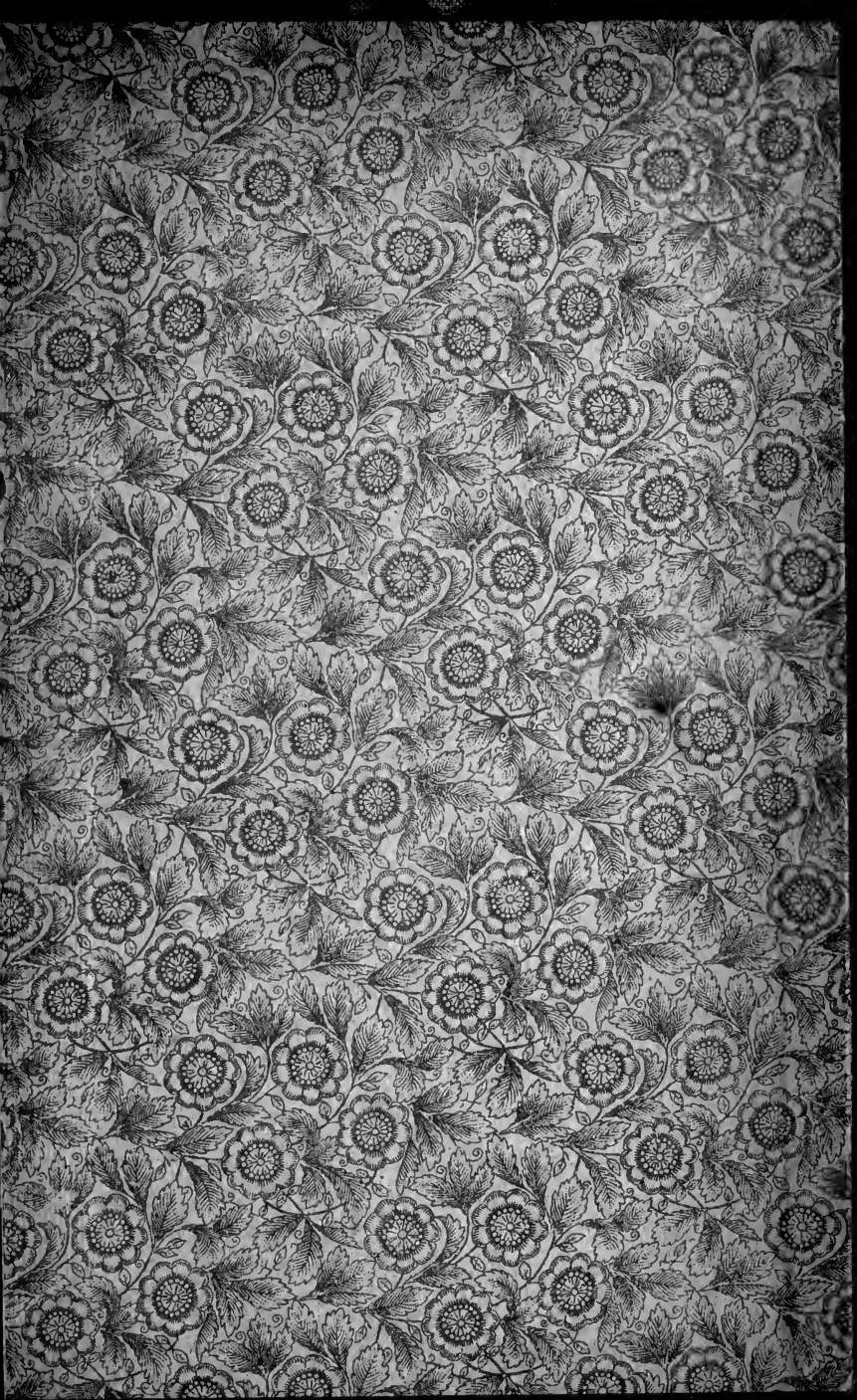
A few months later the country learned that Lord Aubrey had accepted a distant and arduous Viceroyalty, and, in its coarse foolishness, it envied him his greatness.

THE END.

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